

Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai, Vol. 1

**Hajime Kamoshida
Keji Mizoguchi**

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Hajime
kamoshida

Illustration by
keji
MIZoguchi



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One day,

Sakuta Azusagawa met a wild bunny girl. ♪

**Sakuta
Azusagawa**

Second-year at Minegahara High. A bit of a weirdo who doesn't have a cell phone—in today's day and age. After he spots Mai dressed as a bunny girl in the library, they grow closer.

"We'll continue
the date once
this is over.
Be patient and
keep your
distance
until then."

**Mai
Sakurajima**

Third-year at Minegahara High. Originally a child star, she kept getting more successful before abruptly leaving the business two years ago, and she is now just another student.

"Got it."

Tomoe Koga

When Sakuta tries to help a lost child find her mother, Tomoe mistakes him for a creep. She later turns out to be a year behind him at school.

"D-don't call me cute!"

"Half my weight
is made up of my
feelings for you!"

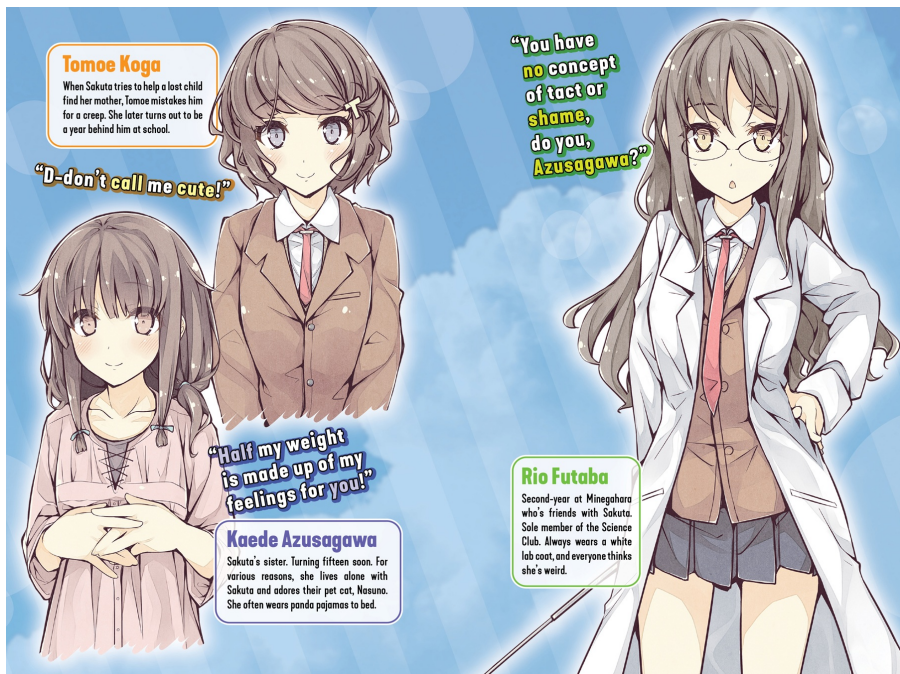
Kaede Azusagawa

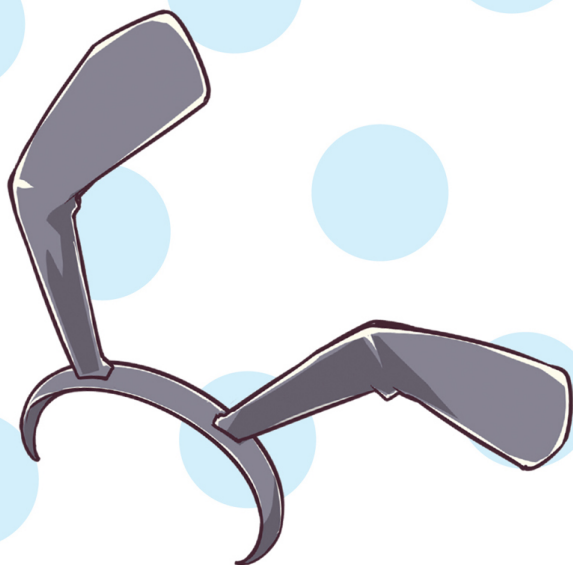
Sakuta's sister. Turning fifteen soon. For various reasons, she lives alone with Sakuta and adores their pet cat, Nasuno. She often wears panda pajamas to bed.

"You have
no concept
of tact or
shame,
do you,
Azusagawa?"

Rio Futaba

Second-year at Minegahara who's friends with Sakuta. Sole member of the Science Club. Always wears a white lab coat, and everyone thinks she's weird.





Chapter 1 Senpai Is a Bunny Girl

Chapter 2 The Price of Making Up

Chapter 3 First Dates Are Always Turbulent

Chapter 4 Our Memories

Chapter 5 A World Without You

Last Chapter And in the Light of Dawn



Hajime kamoshida

Illustration by
keji mizoguchi


New York

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Rascal Does Not Dream of Bunny Girl Senpai
Hajime Kamoshida

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SEISHUN BUTA YARO WA BUNNY GIRL SENPAI NO YUME WO
MINAI Vol. 1

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

“We should kiss.”

She was always teasing me like that. But not long after she said those words, she disappeared.

You could say this is just a typical love story. Me. A girl. Girls. That's all there is to it, really.



senpai is a bunny girl

1

One day, Sakuta Azusagawa met a wild bunny girl.

It was the last day of Golden Week.

A brisk twenty-minute bike ride brought him from his apartment to Shonandai Station, where the Odakyu Enoshima Line, the Soutetsu Izumino Line, and the Yokohama Municipal Subway intersected. The station was surrounded by a sleepy suburb with few buildings of any real height.

Keeping the station on his left, Sakuta made a right at the light. From there, it was only another minute to his destination—the library.

The bike rack was only half-full, so he parked and headed inside.

Sakuta came here a lot, but the distinctive hush inside always put him slightly on edge. His body tensed up a bit as he stepped inside.

It was the largest library in the area and was always pretty busy. Just past the entrance was a stand full of magazines and newspapers. Sakuta spotted a familiar older gentleman scowling at a sports paper. His favorite team must have lost.

As he passed the lending counter, a row of study desks came into view, almost all occupied. High school students, college students, even grown-ups with laptops.

Sakuta barely glanced at them. He headed for the shelves filled with hardback copies of modern novels. His eyes traced the spines arranged in alphabetical order, scanning the section of books that started with *yu*. His search forced him to look down. He was five foot eight, and even the tallest shelves only came to waist height.

He soon found the book his little sister had asked for. The author's name was Kanna Yuigahama. It was called *The Prince Gave Me a Poisoned Apple*. If he remembered correctly, this book had come out something like four or five years ago, but his sister had enjoyed one of the author's other books and was determined to read through the rest of her works.

Sakuta reached for the somewhat tattered spine, pulling the book off the shelf.

Looking back up, he intended to head straight for the lending desk

—but then he caught sight of *her*.

A bunny girl, standing there between the bookshelves.

“.....”

He blinked several times. Apparently, he wasn't seeing things. She was clearly real.

Glossy black high heels on her feet. Long legs in black stockings sheer enough that he could make out the color of her skin beneath. Above that, a black leotard that emphasized her figure—slim but curvy—and created a noticeable, if not especially dramatic, valley up top.

White cuffs provided a bold accent at her wrists, and she wore a black butterfly tie at her throat.

Without the heels, she was probably five foot five. Strong features plus a bored expression gave her a mature charm and ennui he found very attractive.

At first, Sakuta assumed someone must be filming this. He checked around but couldn't see a TV crew anywhere. She was here by herself. Lost and alone. Incredible. A genuine wild bunny girl.

Naturally, she stood out like a sore thumb in the library on a regular afternoon. Totally out of place... In fact, Sakuta could only come up with a few places that might be considered a bunny girl's natural habitat. Vegas casinos or shops of ill repute, perhaps? Either way, bunny girls definitely didn't inhabit the local public library.

Surprisingly, that wasn't even the most shocking thing going on here.

This girl was wearing the most attention-grabbing outfit imaginable, yet no one was looking at her.

“What the...?” he said aloud.

A nearby librarian shot him a glare that clearly said, “Shh!” Though he respectfully bobbed his head in response, he couldn't help but think he wasn't the one most deserving of reproach.

But the terrible truth was already sinking in.

Nobody cared about the bunny girl. They paid her no attention, raised no fuss, and did not even seem to notice she was there.

Ordinarily, if a girl in this stimulating bunny outfit walked past, even that student wrestling with the Six Codes of Japan's legal system would have glanced up. The old man with the sports paper would have pretended to keep reading while stealing glances. And the librarian would have come over and politely suggested a change of attire.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

It was like she was a ghost only Sakuta could see.

He felt a bead of sweat run down his spine.

As he watched in horror, the bunny girl took a volume from one

of the shelves and headed for the study corner in back.

On the way, she leaned in, staring right at a college girl's face—and stuck out her tongue. Then, she put her hands between a businessman and his tablet, waving it up and down as if verifying he couldn't see her. When neither of them reacted, she smiled, seemingly satisfied.

She then took a seat at the very back.

There was a college guy buried in research across from her. He never noticed her. She noticed the front of her leotard starting to sag and gave it a quick tug back in place, but still, the college guy failed to react at all. Even though he was looking right at her.

After a while, the student finished his research and got ready to go, as if absolutely nothing was out of the ordinary. Then he left—again, like nothing at all unusual had taken place. He didn't even try to glance down at her cleavage as he passed.

“.....”



Sakuta hesitated for a moment but then sat down in the seat the college guy had vacated.

He stared directly at the bunny girl across from him, examining the soft curve of her bare shoulders. They moved faintly with each breath she took, a weirdly compelling sight here in the library, symbol of everything serious and dedicated. Sakuta felt like he was losing his mind. Maybe he already had.

After a few minutes, she glanced up from her book, and their eyes met.

“.....”

“.....”

Both of them blinked twice.

Her lips parted first.

“What a shock,” she said. There was an impish flair to her voice. “You can still see me.”

That made it sound like nobody else could.

But to Sakuta’s ears, these words rang true. At that very moment, even as outlandish as her presence was, there still didn’t seem to be a single other person who had noticed she was there.

“Well, then.”

She closed her book and stood up.

That should have been the end of it. He could have reduced the entire event to a funny anecdote to tell his friends later. But Sakuta couldn’t let it go that easily.

Because he knew who she was.

She went to his school, Minegahara High. A third-year student, a year ahead of him—his senpai. He even knew her name. Her full name.

Mai Sakurajima.

That was the identity of the bunny girl.

“Um.”

Just before her bare back vanished into the shelves, he called after her.

Mai stopped and shot him a questioning look over her shoulder.

“You’re Sakurajima, right?” he asked, careful to keep his voice low. “From third year?”

“.....”

A flicker of surprise crossed her face. “If you know that, then you probably go to Minegahara?”

She sat back down, looking him over.

“Sakuta Azusagawa, Class 2-1. The same Azusagawa as the highway rest area chain. *Saku* is *bloom*, and *ta* comes from *taro*.”

“I’m Mai Sakurajima. *Mai* from *Mai Sakurajima* and *Sakurajima*

from *Mai Sakurajima*. Mai Sakurajima.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re famous.”

“Right.”

She seemed to lose interest. Resting one cheek on her hand, her gaze drifted to the window nearby. She was leaning forward just enough to emphasize her cleavage. Sakuta’s eyes were dragged to it. A sight to behold.

“Sakuta Azusagawa.”

“Yes.”

“Let me offer you a warning.”

“A warning?”

“Forget what you saw today.”

He opened his mouth, but before anything could emerge, she spoke again.

“If you tell anyone about this, they’ll think you’re crazy, and you’ll be forced to spend the rest of your life labeled a lunatic.”

That was a fair warning.

“Also, never speak to me again.”

“.....”

“Say yes if you understand.”

“.....”

When he said nothing, Mai looked annoyed. But this soon faded, replaced with the ennui from before. She stood up, put the book back on the shelf, and headed for the entrance.

Not one person she passed paid Mai any attention. Even as she sailed past the lending desk, the librarians just kept working in silence. Only Sakuta was left unable to tear his eyes off that pair of lovely stocking-clad legs.

Once she was completely out of sight, Sakuta slumped on his desk.

“Forget?” he muttered. “How can you forget *that* outfit?”

Bare skin from the open shoulders down to her chest. When she’d leaned on her elbow, deepening the valley. The pleasant smell lingering in his nostrils. Her soft voice, just loud enough that only Sakuta could hear. Those clear eyes, looking straight into his. Every part of that was hitting Sakuta’s erogenous zones and getting him *very* worked up.

He was afraid if he stood up, people around him would notice.

It seemed he’d be stuck at this desk awhile.

He had a lot he wanted to ask Mai. But he was forced to save those questions for another day.

The next morning, Sakuta awoke from a strange dream. He mostly remembered being crushed beneath a pile of bunnies.

“Take a hint! Those were supposed to be bunny girls!” he grumbled as he tried to sit up. “Mm?”

But this didn’t go as planned. There was a significant weight on his left shoulder, pinning him to the bed.

He pulled the covers back and discovered the cause.

There was a girl in pajamas curled up next to him, her arms wrapped around his left arm. Sleeping peacefully. Pulling the covers back must have made her cold, because she cuddled up even closer to him.

This was his sister, Kaede. She would be fifteen this year.

“Wake up, Kaede. It’s morning.”

“But it’s so cold...”

She didn’t seem like she was moving, so he picked her up and got out of bed.

“Damn, you’re heavy!”

Kaede was five foot four, rather tall for her age, and she’d been growing rapidly lately. The heft in his arms made it very clear she was no longer a little girl.

“Half my weight is made up of my feelings for you!” she protested.

“Do you even hear yourself? I hope the other half is medicine for the headache you just gave me. Also, if you’re awake, get up already.”

“Ugh.”

Grumbling, she let him put her down. Her face had really matured a lot over the last year, and there was a serious gulf opening up between the way she looked and the way she acted. What would have been a totally normal level of physical contact for siblings a year ago was definitely making Sakuta uncomfortable now.

“It’s really time you stopped crawling into bed with me.”

Probably also high time she stopped wearing hooded pajamas that looked like a panda.

“I came to wake you up, but you wouldn’t get up, so it’s really your fault.”

That sulky face made her look younger than she was.

“Fine, but you’re still too old to be doing stuff like that anymore.”

“Oh? Am I getting you all hot and bothered?”

“Sisters don’t work like that.”

He rapped her forehead lightly and left the room.

“Ah! Wait for me!”

After he made breakfast for both of them, they ate together. Sakuta finished first and got ready for school.

“Take care!” Kaede said. She saw him off with a smile, but he left

the house alone.

He started yawning before he even made it out of the apartment complex. The day before had been far too stimulating, and he'd had a lot of trouble drifting off. Waking from a weird dream was never a good way to start the day.

Yawning again, he made his way through the residential streets. There was a single bridge he had to cross on the way. As he neared the station, the buildings around him grew taller. It grew more crowded, too—everyone was heading the same way he was.

He eventually reached the main road, waited for the light, and crossed at the crosswalk. As he passed business hotels and consumer electronics shops, the train station finally came into view.

All in all, the walk took about ten minutes.

His destination was Fujisawa Station, located in the heart of Fujisawa, a city in Kanagawa Prefecture. Clumps of students and office workers on the way to school or work streamed by.

On the station's first floor were the Odakyu Lines. Incoming trains bound for Shinjuku and trains stopping here to head back toward Katase-Enoshima. On the second floor were gates for the JR Tokaido and Shonan-Shinjuku Lines.

Sakuta joined the throngs headed up the stairs but turned away from the JR gates.

He went down a thirty-yard connecting passage that led to the Odakyu Department Store. Not that he was planning to go shopping. This early, the store was still closed. He turned left at the shuttered doors, into the *other* Fujisawa Station.

The Enoshima Electric Railway. Enoden for short—*den* being the first sound in the Japanese word for *electric railway*. It was a single-track railway that stopped at thirteen stations on the way to Kamakura—about a thirty-minute ride.

Sakuta flashed his commuter pass and was through the gates just as the train pulled in. The train was green, with the window frames in cream—kind of a retro look. Trains on this line were short, only four cars long.

Sakuta walked down the length of the platform, entering the front car.

Short, medium, and tall, there were a lot of passengers in uniforms. The rest wore business suits. Before he moved here, Sakuta had assumed this line was for tourists, but plenty of locals used it for their daily commutes.

Sakuta grabbed a spot by the door.

As he did, someone spoke to him. “Sup.”

The boy who joined him while stifling a yawn was quite

handsome—if there were a rumor that he was repped by a famous male idol agency, it'd be very believable. He had sharp-edged features and, at a glance, could be somewhat intimidating, but the moment he smiled, that impression vanished, leaving only the face of a friendly child. This appeared to be a huge hit with all the girls.

His name was Yuuma Kunimi. A second-year student and a starter on the basketball team. And he had a girlfriend.

“Sigh...”

“That’s no way to greet someone.”

“That pleasant smile of yours is the last thing I need this early in the morning. Instant depression.”

“For real?”

“For real.”

They chatted about this and that. Eventually, the departure bell rang, and the doors closed.

The train heaved itself into motion, traveling at a speed so slow it always seemed like it must still be getting up to speed. Before it ever did, though, it began slowing on the approach to Ishigami Station.

“So, Kunimi.”

“Mm?”

“About Sakurajima...”

“You poor thing.”

Before he could finish the question, Yuuma cut him off, giving Sakuta a comforting pat on his back.

“Why are you pitying me?”

“I’m thrilled to see you express interest in a girl besides Makinohara, but, well... She’s out of your league.”

“I didn’t say I was in love or planning to ask her out.”

“Then what?”

“I just wondered what she was like.”

“Hmm... I mean, for one thing, she’s famous.”

“I know *that*.”

Yes—Mai Sakurajima was a legitimate celebrity. Every student at Minegahara High knew who she was. It’s likely that 70 to 80 percent of the population of Japan did. She was so famous that figure didn’t even sound exaggerated.

“She started acting when she was six. Then the morning soap she was on got ratings so high it was like the golden age of television, turning her into a sensation.”

Her popularity exploded, leading to appearances in all kinds of movies, shows, and commercials. She was so in demand that not a single day went by without her showing up on everyone’s TV screens.

Certainly, two or three years after her meteoric rise, the “Everything must have Mai Sakurajima” fad passed, but by that point,

her sheer skill as an actor kept the offers flooding in.

In a business where it wasn't unusual for performers to fade out in a single year, she worked steadily into her junior high years. That alone was impressive enough, but she was about to get another big break.

By the age of fourteen, Mai Sakurajima had grown into a girl wise beyond her years. A starring role in a hit movie set off another surge of media attention so intense that there were weeks where it seemed like her smiling face was on the cover of every magazine.

"I had a major crush on her back in junior high. Like, she had it all! Cute! Sexy! Mysterious!"

Yuuma was hardly the only one. Legions of boys felt the same.

Her popularity reached a new peak, but just as it did—Mai suddenly announced she was taking a break. This was just before she graduated junior high. No clear reason was ever given—and a little over two years had passed since then.

When Sakuta had learned *the* Mai Sakurajima was attending his school, he'd been pretty surprised.

Wow, famous people really do exist, he'd thought.

"Man, I remember all the rumors, too. People said her success was due to casting couches or that she was sleeping with a producer..."

"In elementary school?"

"Nah, this was at least in junior high. Actually, the earliest versions of the rumors to hit the gossip shows were all about her mother—her manager. But *she's* got her own agency now. Company president. I heard about it on TV just last week."

"Huh, I didn't know that... I mean, rumors like that are totally baseless, of course."

"But where there's smoke, there's fire, right?"

"The smoke may not even be coming from her, though. Not in the world we live in."

Information spread like wildfire across the Internet. People everywhere could learn about things in a flash. Even if it wasn't true. The people spreading this or that scoop usually didn't care what the facts were. They only cared if they could make a joke, get attention from it, join in a fad, or rub it in someone's face. Nothing more.

"Coming from you, that does sound convincing..."

Sakuta let that pass without comment.

The train rolled slowly through four more stations: Yanagikoji, Kugenuma, Shonankaigankoen, and Enoshima.

Sakuta glanced out the window, noticing they were currently rolling down the part of the line that cut through the middle of a regular street. It was always strange seeing regular cars right outside the windows. But he barely had time to think *Oh!* before they were

back on normal tracks.

This section of the line had buildings built so close to the train's path it seemed like a collision could happen at any moment. Like you could reach out the window and touch the walls of people's houses as they flitted by. Almost as if the branches and leaves in the backyards might actually brush against the windows.

Heedless of such concerns, the train slipped in between the houses at a leisurely pace, eventually reaching Koshigoe Station.

"But I've never seen her with anyone at school."

"Mm?"

"Sakurajima. You're the one who brought her up, Sakuta."

"Oh, right."

"She's always on her own."

She didn't fit in with her class—or with the school. That was the impression Sakuta had of her as well.

"A senpai from basketball team said she didn't come to school at all for a good chunk of her first year here."

"Why not?"

"Work. She'd announced she was taking a break, but there were still contracts in place she had to honor."

"Oh, I guess she would."

But why announce it publicly before those jobs were taken care of? If there was some reason it needed to be said right away...

"She didn't start attending regularly until after summer vacation."

"...That sounds rough."

Sakuta could imagine what Mai found when she arrived that fall. Her classmates would have spent an entire term forming cliques and feeling out the hierarchies of school.

"You can guess the rest," Yuuma said, clearly thinking the same thing.

Once the makeup of a class was set, it was hard to change or inject yourself. Everyone got comfortable where they were, then dug in. It was normal for people to protect their positions.

When Mai started attending in second term, no one knew what to do with her. Plus, she was a celebrity. Everyone was curious, but reaching out to her was a risk. Anyone who tried to make friends with her would have attracted attention. Attention that carried a high risk of people saying things behind their back like "So obnoxious..." or "Who do they think they are?" This made it all but impossible for Mai to fit in.

And once you're out...there's no going back. Everyone knows that. That's how schools work.

This was probably why Mai had never managed to find a place to belong at school.

Everyone loved to groan about how boring things were, wishing something interesting would happen. But nobody really wanted things to ever change.

Sakuta was no exception. If nothing exciting was going on, that meant things were easy. He could relax and be comfortable. No need to stress himself out. Hooray for peaceful days. Boredom rules.

The warning bell rang, and the doors slid closed.

The train lurched into motion again, passing slowly through more rows of houses.

There was a wall right outside the window, which soon gave way to a different wall. Wall followed wall, house followed house, interrupted only by the occasional crossing. And right when it seemed like this would never end, with no warning at all...the view opened up.

The sea.

Blue water as far as the eye could see, reflecting the morning sunlight, glittering.

The sky.

Blue sky as far as the eye could see, clear morning air fading from blue to white as it stretched into the distance.

Between the two, the sharp line of the horizon. Like magic, every eye on the train turned toward the windows.

For a while, the train ran along the Shichirigahama coast, overlooking Sagami Bay. The breathtaking sight included everything from Enoshima itself on the right to the dazzling beaches of Yuigahama on the left.

“But why are we suddenly bringing up Mai Sakurajima?”

“Kunimi, do you like bunny girls?” Sakuta asked, not taking his eyes off the view.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“So you *love* them, then?”

“You got that right.”

“In that case, I can’t say...”

“The hell is that supposed to mean? Come on, man, tell me.” Yuuma poked him in the ribs.

“If you ran into an attractive bunny girl at the library, what would you do?”

“A double take.”

“Figured.”

“And then I’d stare until my eyes fell out.”

That was the natural human response. At least, the natural straight male response.

“So what’s this got to do with Mai Sakurajima?”

“They’re sort of related, but...I dunno.”

“You’ve lost me.”

Yuuma clearly decided it wasn’t worth asking when Sakuta insisted on being this evasive. He settled for a pleasant smile instead.

The train rolled along the coast, pausing at another station, and then finally reached Shichirigahama Station, the stop for Minegahara High—Sakuta’s school.

When the train doors opened, the scent of the sea wafted in.

Crowds of students in matching uniforms filed off the train. A single scarecrow-like machine stood at the entrance, reading the chips in their train passes. During the day, there would be an attendant standing by, but there was no one around at the hour Minegahara students plodded through.

Outside the station, they only had to pass a single crossing before the school was right in front of them.

“So how’s Kaede doing?”

“You can’t have her.”

“Come on, be nice to your new brother-in-law.”

“You already have a girlfriend who’s plenty cute, Kunimi.”

“True, now that you mention it.”

“She’d be pissed if she heard any of this.”

“Works for me. Kamisato’s cute when she’s mad. Hoh-hoh, whaddaya know? Thar she blows.”

Sakuta followed Yuuma’s gaze and saw Mai Sakurajima walking on her own several yards ahead of them. Long arms and legs. Petite face. A slim, fashion-model build. Everyone wore the same uniform, but on her, it looked totally different. The black tights she wore, the skirt hiding the curve of her backside, the perfectly fit blazer—it all just seemed totally out of place. Like she was wearing someone else’s clothes. It was her third year here, but Mai didn’t seem to belong in her uniform.

There were three girls chatting near her, and each of them looked much more comfortable in their school clothes. A first-year who was enthusiastically greeting a senpai from her club wore it far better. Even the male student playfully kicking a friend in the back came off as full of life by comparison.

The short road from the station to the school was filled with Minegahara students, chatting and laughing.

But in the center of it all, Mai walked alone in silence, completely isolated. Like an alien who’d wandered into an ordinary high school. Someone out of place. An ugly duckling. It was impossible to look at her any other way.

In fact, nobody was looking at all. *The* Mai Sakurajima was right here, but she attracted no attention. Nobody seemed excited to catch a

glimpse of her. At Minegahara High, that was just *normal*.

Mai was simply there, like the air itself. Everyone accepted this. It reminded Sakuta of what he'd seen in the Shonandai Library. A sense of unease rose up inside him.

"Uh, Kunimi..."

"Mm?"

"You can see Sakurajima, right?"

"Yep, clear as daylight. I've got good eyes. Both twenty-ten!"

Yuuma's answer was just as he'd expected. So what exactly had Sakuta seen the day before?

"See ya later."

"Mm."

Yuuma was in a different class this year, so they split up at the second-floor landing. Sakuta headed for Class 2-1. When he got there, the room was already half-full.

He sat down at the front of the row by the windows. With a name like Azusagawa, he pretty much always ended up here on the spring seating charts. Unless there was an Aikawa or an Aizawa, he'd generally be first on the class roll. Unfortunately, being first in this case didn't come with any real upside. Still, ever since starting at Minegahara High, Sakuta had come to appreciate this spring seating arrangement.

After all, the windows at school offered a commanding view of the ocean.

He could see a number of people out wind surfing, hoping to catch an early morning breeze.

"Hey."

"....."

"Hey, I'm talking to you."

Hearing a voice nearby, Sakuta looked up.

A girl was standing in front of his desk, staring crossly down at him. A key member of this class's most popular group of girls. Her name was Saki Kamisato.

Big, wide-open eyes. Hair to her shoulders that curled slightly inward. Subtle makeup, with a tasteful shade of pink on her lips. All the guys agreed she was cute.

"Can't believe you ignored me!"

"Sorry. Didn't think there was still anyone in class who'd actually talk to me."

"Listen..."

The bell rang.

And the teacher came in with it.

"Argh! We need to talk. Roof, after school."

She slapped his desk and then wove her way through the classroom back to her own seat.

"I don't get a say, huh?" he muttered. Then he put his chin on his hand and focused on the view.

The sea was still there. Offering no assistance.

"What a pain..."

Getting called out after school by a girl didn't give Sakuta even the slightest flicker of hope. Not even the tiniest hint of a thrill.

For one thing, Saki Kamisato was dating Yuuma Kunimi.

3

After school, Sakuta pretended he'd forgotten his appointment and started heading for the shoe lockers but then thought better of it and went to the roof. He'd decided blowing her off now would only make things worse later. Haste makes waste... Though maybe that didn't quite apply in this case.

Regardless, the first words Saki Kamisato said to him were "You're late!"

Already mad. Totally unfair.

"I was on cleaning duty."

"I don't care."

"So what do you want?"

"I'll get right to the point," Saki began, glaring right into Sakuta's eyes. "You're a total outcast in class, so being with you devalues Yuuma's stock."

"....."

Quite a thing to say but certainly to the point.

"Despite this being the first time we've ever spoken, you sure know a lot about me, Kamisato," he said, keeping his voice flat.

"Everyone knows about the whole 'hospitalization incident.'"

"Right, that," Sakuta said absently, like the topic bored him.

"If you feel at all sorry for Yuuma, never talk to him again."

"By that logic, you're the one in trouble now. Your stock's crashing as we speak."

There were other students on the roof, and the palpable tension between him and Saki was drawing a lot of attention.

A few were even typing on their phones. Probably reporting to their friends.

How industrious.

"Forget about me. This is about Yuuma."

"I see. You're amazing, Kamisato."

“Huh? Why’d you suddenly compliment me?”

He’d intended it as a bit of a joke at her expense, but this seemed lost on her.

“I don’t think you need to worry. Kunimi’ll be fine. His market value won’t take a hit just because someone sees him talking to me. Everyone knows he’s the kind of guy who eats the lunch his mom made him with real appreciation and always talks about how great it is every time. They know he’s a good dude who looks after people.”

Yuuma had laughed once, saying that anyone raised by a single mom knew how precious mothers were, but even an idiot knew it wasn’t that simple. There had to be kids who came from similar homes who acted out all the harder.

“So don’t worry. Kunimi’s such a great guy, he’s honestly way too good for someone like you.”

“You trying to start something?”

“You’re the one who showed up raring for a fight, Kamisato.”

Sakuta was starting to get annoyed, and it was finally showing in his tone.

“Ugh, don’t remind me! Why does he call you by your given name but calls me Kamisato? I’m his girlfriend! So why does Yuuma use my family name?”

This was the last thing he’d expected to spark a tangent. *Who cares?* he thought but left that unsaid. He didn’t need her love life burdening him any more than it already was.

But what he chose to say instead was possibly even worse.

“You’re really on edge today. Is it that time of the month?”

“Hah?!”

She turned beet red.

“Th— Drop dead! You idiot! I hope you die!!”

Having completely lost her cool, Saki headed back inside, screaming insults over her shoulder. She slammed the door behind her.

Still standing there, Sakuta scratched his head, muttering “Crap, maybe it actually was” with a hint of regret.

To avoid accidentally bumping into Saki Kamisato in the halls, Sakuta spent a while enjoying the sea breeze on the roof before heading home.

By the time he reached the shoe lockers, the sky was turning red.

The place was quiet. No one to be found. This time of day was like a lull between two waves—students who left immediately after their last class were long gone, but everyone else was still busy with their clubs or practice. As he changed into his shoes, he could hear the sports teams shouting in the distance. That far-off sound only made

him feel more alone.

The walk to the station almost made it seem like he'd rented out the whole road for his own personal use. He was soon inside Shichirigahama Station, which was also pretty empty. He usually left with everyone else when classes ended, joining a huge crowd of students packed onto the tiny platform, but today there were only a few people around.

His eyes were instantly drawn to one of them. A girl standing stoically at the end of the platform, as if rejecting all contact with those around her—earbud cords dangling loose, the cord leading to the jacket pocket of her uniform.

Mai Sakurajima.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, she radiated forlorn beauty—just standing there, she was picture-perfect. Sakuta felt like he could gaze at her all day...but his curiosity overwhelmed that urge.

"Hi," he said, walking up to her.

"....."

No answer.

"Hello?" he said, somewhat louder.

"....."

Still no answer.

But he was pretty sure she'd noticed him.

Sakuta and Mai stood on the quiet platform, waiting for the train. There were three other Minegahara students scattered around. Then, a college-aged couple entered—likely tourists. They flashed a Noriori-kun day pass at the attendant on gate duty as they passed through.

After moving to the center of the platform, they almost immediately noticed Mai.

"Hey..."

"Isn't that...?"

He could hear them whispering. Pointing at her. Mai kept her eyes on the tracks, as if she hadn't noticed.

"You shouldn't, you know!" the woman whispered playfully, clearly not trying to stop him at all. Their flirty teasing echoed through the hushed station. Sakuta found it quite grating.

Unable to stand it any longer, he turned to face them and found the guy pointing his phone's camera at Mai.

Before he could tap the button, Sakuta stepped into frame. There was a click, but all he got was a close-up of Sakuta frowning.

The man looked surprised, then angry.

"Wh-who the hell are you?" he snarled, stepping forward. Couldn't let some high school boy show him up in front of his girlfriend, after all.

"A human being," Sakuta said with a straight face. Very literal.

Technically correct.

“Huh?”

“And you’re a creepshot photographer.”

“Wha—?! N-no!”

“You’re old enough to know better. What you were doing makes me ashamed to be the same species as you.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You were going to tweet that photo like you’d just slain a demon, right?”

“?!”

Anger and shame flashed across the man’s face. Sakuta must have hit the nail on the head.

“If you crave attention so badly, I could tweet your photo and tag it ‘Creepshot Photographer.’”

“.....”

“Didn’t anyone teach you this when you were a kid? ‘If you wouldn’t want it done to you, don’t do it to anyone else.’”

“Sh-shut up, twerp!” the guy managed. Then he grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and dragged her into the Kamakura-bound train that had just arrived. Only a single track ran through the station, so no matter which way the train was headed, it stopped in the same place.

Sakuta watched the cars pull out and then felt eyes boring into his back.

Suddenly nervous, he turned around and found Mai pulling her headphones out, looking annoyed.

Her eyes met Sakuta’s.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Huh?”

He’d expected a different reaction and was unable to disguise his surprise.

“You thought I’d yell at you? Something like ‘Mind your own business?’”

“Uh...yeah.”

“I thought it but left it unsaid.”

“You could have left that bit unsaid, too.”

Frankly, this admission was tantamount to saying it in the first place.

“I’m used to that sort of thing.”

“Even if you are, it still eats away at you, right?”

“.....”

A glimmer of surprise appeared in her eyes.

“Eats away... That’s very apt,” she admitted.

A smile crossed her lips, as if she was enjoying herself.

Feeling like she might actually be willing to talk some more,

Sakuta stood next to her.

But before he could ask her anything, she said, “Why are you here at a strange time like this?”

“I got summoned to the roof by a girl from class.”

“A confession? You’re that popular? How unexpected.”

“A confession of undying hatred.”

“Oh?”

“She told me to my face she hates my guts.”

“Well, that’s the hot new trend.”

“It was certainly a first for me. What about you, Sakurajima? Why are you here so late?”

“I was just killing time so I wouldn’t bump into you again.”

He glanced over at her but couldn’t tell how serious she was from her profile. Deciding he’d rather not know if she meant it, he let it drop.

Instead, he turned toward the train schedule, changing the subject.

“What time is it now?”

“Time to get a watch.”

He held up both wrists. Both were bare.

“Then check your phone.”

“Don’t have one.”

“Not even a dumb phone?”

“Smart or dumb, I haven’t got it. I didn’t accidentally leave it at home today, either.”

He didn’t own any kind of phone.

“...In this day and age?”

Mai clearly found this hard to believe.

“I’m serious. I mean, I used to have one, but I got pissed and threw it in the ocean.”

He remembered it well. That was the day he’d come to check the Minegahara entrance exam results...

That little seven-ounce box, a handy-dandy device that connected him to the rest of the world, traced a gentle arc through the air when it sailed out of his hand and fell into the sea.

“Trash belongs in a trash can.”

She was absolutely correct.

“I’ll do that next time.”

“I take it you have no friends?”

Without a phone, how would someone make plans with other people? That was the world they lived in. Mai made a good point. Exchanging numbers, e-mail addresses, and IDs was the start of many a friendship, and the lack of any of these placed you outside the bounds of modern society. In the microcosm of a school, anyone who

failed to stay inside the boundaries was regarded with deep suspicion. Sakuta had a lot of trouble making friends early on.

“I have two whole friends.”

“Why’d you make that sound like two is a lot?”

“Two is more than enough! I just have to stay friends with them forever.”

The number of phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and IDs on his contact list was irrelevant. Quantity didn’t matter at all. Not in Sakuta’s philosophy.

For one thing, what exactly was a friend? Sakuta’s baseline was “someone who’d reluctantly put up with it even if he called them for advice late at night.”

“Hmm,” Mai murmured, taking her own phone out of her jacket pocket. There was a red cover on it with bunny ears.

She showed him the screen. The time was 4:37. The next train was only a minute away. But as soon as Sakuta had finally learned what time it was, Mai’s phone started vibrating. An incoming call.

He could make out the word **Manager** on her screen.

She declined the call, though, and the vibration stopped.

“You sure?”

“The train’s coming...and I know what she has to say.”

He thought he heard a note of irritation in that second part.

The Fujisawa-bound train rolled slowly into the station...

Sakuta and Mai stepped on together, then found empty seats next to each other.

The doors closed, and the train lurched forward. The car was reasonably full. About 80 percent of the seats were occupied, while a few people remained standing.

Two stations passed in silence. Leaving the ocean view behind, the train started rattling through the residential area.

“So about yesterday.”

“Forget about that. I warned you, right?”

“Your bunny-girl outfit was far too sexy to ever forget.”

The yawn he’d been trying to stifle managed to escape just then.

“It had me so worked up, I couldn’t sleep a wink last night.”

He stared at Mai reproachfully.

“H-hey! You’re not imagining me doing anything weird, are you?”

Sakuta had expected a look of scorn and possibly a stream of insults, but Mai was actually turning red and stammering. The glare she shot him was clearly an attempt to disguise her embarrassment. It was rather cute.

But she soon recovered.

“N-not that I’d be bothered *at all* by some young boy fantasizing

about me,” she said, trying to put up a front. But her cheeks were still flushed. This was an obvious bluff. She might have come across as a mature adult, but there was definitely an inexperienced kid underneath.

“Don’t sit so close.”

She gave his shoulder a push, like trying to bat away something filthy.

“Wooow. So harsh!”

“You might get me pregnant.”

“What should we name it?”

“Really...?” Her gaze turned frosty.

Maybe he’d gone a bit too far.

“It wasn’t my outfit I was telling you to forget,” she said.

“Then what was that?” If Mai was going to bring the subject up herself, Sakuta was going to press her on it. This was what he’d wanted to ask about in the first place.

“Sakuta Azusagawa,” she began.

“You remembered my name?”

“I try to remember every name after I’ve heard it once.”

An admirable goal. She might have been on hiatus at the moment, but being in the business had clearly cultivated some lifelong habits.

“I’ve heard the rumors about you.”

“Oh...those.”

He knew what she meant. Same thing that had gotten him summoned to the roof today.

“I suppose *saw* is more accurate than *heard*,” Mai said, pulling her phone out of her blazer pocket again. The browser was open to some forum or other.

“You went to junior high in Yokohama.”

“I did.”

“And got in a fight that left three classmates hospitalized.”

“Well, you know, I’m such a *great* martial artist.”

“And that’s why you withdrew from the Yokohama high school you’d originally planned to attend and went with your second choice—Minegahara High. And moved here.”

“.....”

“There’s more. Should I continue?”

“.....”

“Well, like a certain someone just said, ‘If you wouldn’t want it done to you, don’t do it to anyone else.’”

“I don’t mind you asking. I’m honored you’ve taken an interest.”

“The Internet’s something else. All kinds of personal info, just out there in the open.”

“True.”

What else was there to say?

“Of course, no guarantee what it says is accurate.”

“What do you make of it?”

“It’s obvious if you think about it. Someone who’d actually done that wouldn’t be attending high school like nothing happened.”

“Wish my classmates had heard you say that.”

“Why not just tell them it isn’t true?”

“Rumors are like...the air in a room. The vibe or the mood or whatever you want to call it. These days, you’ve got to know how to read the room.”

“That’s true.”

“Anyone who can’t pick up on it well enough gets shunned. And the people who create those unspoken rules aren’t aware of it, so if you make a passionate argument for the truth, everyone’s just gonna be like, ‘The hell’s *his* problem?’”

The battle wasn’t with the people themselves, which was why nothing Sakuta could say would get him anywhere. Anything he tried would backfire in the most unexpected way.

“Fighting the air is pointless.”

“So you just let the misunderstanding stand? Give up without a fight?”

“This stuff is totally unsourced Internet gossip. I don’t see how I could ever be friends with anyone dumb enough to believe that crap without a second thought.”

“You sound pretty mad.”

Mai was smiling. It seemed like she agreed.

“Your turn.”

“.....”

She shot him a grumpy look. But now that she had heard his story, she gave in.

“I first noticed when the holidays started.”

In other words, four days ago. May 3. Constitution Memorial Day.

“I went to the Enoshima Aquarium on a whim.”

“Alone?”

“Is that bad?”

“Just wondering if you’ve got a boyfriend.”

“I’ve never had a boyfriend,” Mai said, rolling her eyes.

“Ohhh?”

“You’d rather I wasn’t a virgin?”

She gave him a sideways glance, like she was teasing him.

“.....”

“.....”

They stared at each other in silence.

Mai gradually turned red. Even her neck was red. She’d brought it

up, but the word *virgin* was clearly far more embarrassing than she had thought.

“Uh, I wouldn’t have held it against you,” he said, trying to smooth it over.

“G-good. A-anyway! There I was, surrounded by families at the aquarium, when I suddenly realized nobody was looking at me.”

She was sulking a bit, which made Mai look much younger. He’d always thought she seemed really mature, so this felt like a new side of her. But mentioning this seemed like it would derail the conversation again, so he kept it to himself.

“At first, I thought I was imagining it. I haven’t worked in a couple of years; everyone was busy looking at the fish, et cetera.”

Her tone was steadily growing grim.

“But on the way home, I stopped in a café, and the truth became clear. The hostess didn’t greet me. Nobody showed me to a table.”

“And it wasn’t a seat-yourself place?”

“No. An old-style place. A row of seats at the counter and four little tables to one side.”

“No chance you’ve been there before and done something that got you banned for life?”

“Of course not!” One cheek twitched angrily, and she stomped on his foot.

“Your foot, senpai.”

“What about it?”

Mai had an impressive poker face. Like she genuinely had no idea what he was referring to. Perhaps this was nothing for a professional actress.

“I’m overjoyed you chose to step on mine with it.”

He’d meant this as a joke, but Mai seemed genuinely repulsed. The boy sitting next to her had just disembarked, so she took the opportunity to put a space between the two of them.

“I’m kidding.”

“You were at least marginally serious. I could tell.”

“Well, sure. What guy wouldn’t want to spend quality time with a beautiful senpai?”

“Riiight. I’m never getting through this story if you don’t shut up. Where was I?”

“You’d just been banned from a café.”

“That’s enough.”

There was a glint in her eyes. She was clearly actually mad at him.

As a way of indicating remorse, Sakuta mimed zipping his lips shut.

“The café staff didn’t speak to me or respond,” Mai continued. Her

mood had not improved. “Neither did any of the customers. I got so flustered I left and just started running.”

“How far?”

“All the way to Fujisawa Station. But when I got there, everything was normal. Everyone saw me. Surprised faces whispered, ‘It’s Mai Sakurajima!’ everywhere. So I figured I must have imagined what happened in Enoshima. But then I started wondering if the same thing would happen anywhere else. I began investigating.”

“Hence the bunny-girl outfit?”

“Dressed like that, everyone who can see me will naturally look. No way I can convince myself I’m just imagining it.”

That was certainly true. Sakuta’s reaction alone was proof of concept.

“So...this started happening in other places, too? At the very least, you ran into it again in Shonandai.”

“Yeah. I was starting to hope there was no one left who could see me.”

She shot Sakuta a reproachful glare, like this was his fault.

“But school has been totally normal. For now.”

Mai flicked an eyebrow at the door toward the back of the car. Some boys in some other school’s uniforms had their phones out, angling the screens at—well, obviously not Sakuta.

“As weird as this all is, it sounds like you’re kind of enjoying it.”

Sakuta figured he might as well ask directly. She definitely didn’t seem like someone grappling with a tragedy.

“Because I am!”

“You’re serious?” he asked. He didn’t see the upside.

“I’ve spent my whole life at the center of attention. Always aware that people were watching. As a kid, I used to wish that I could visit a world where no one knew me.”

She didn’t seem like she was making this up. Even if it was a performance, what he knew about her made it sound believable. She *had* been a famous actress her whole life.

As they talked, Sakuta saw Mai’s attention drift to a movie poster hanging from the train’s ceiling. It was an ad for an adaption of a popular novel. The lead actress was a big name, one making a major push for stardom. She was roughly Mai’s age.

Was Mai still following current events in the industry? Did she miss it? No, neither of those felt right. It was like she was staring at something far away, conflicted emotions swirling behind her eyes.

Like she just couldn’t let go.

“Hello?”

“.....”

“Sakurajima?”

“I hear you.”

She blinked once and looked back at him.

“I’m thrilled this is happening. Let me enjoy it.”

“.....”

The train had stopped at Fujisawa Station. End of the line. The doors opened. Mai stood up first, and Sakuta scrambled after her.

“Get it now? See how crazy I am?”

“.....”

“Just leave me alone,” she snapped. Then she sped up her pace, passing through the gates. She pulled away from Sakuta like this was good-bye.

Sakuta followed her from a distance for a while—to be fair, she was headed the way he had to go. They crossed the connecting passage to the JR station.

Mai stopped in front of a coin locker in the corner and pulled a paper bag out of it. Then she started walking again, headed for the counter of a bakery stand.

“One cream bun,” she said, addressing the woman at the counter.

The woman must not have heard her. She didn’t respond.

“One cream bun,” Mai said again.

But the woman still didn’t react, like she couldn’t see Mai at all. She accepted a thousand-yen bill from a businessman who’d arrived after Mai. Like she couldn’t hear Mai’s voice. Next, she handed over some melon buns to a junior high school girl.

“Can I get a cream bun?” Sakuta asked, stepping up next to Mai.

“Coming right up!” the woman said. She passed a paper bag across the counter, and Sakuta passed back 130 yen.

A few steps away from the stand, he handed Mai the bag with the cream bun inside.

She was staring uncomfortably at her feet.

“Seems like there’s a downside.”

“Yes. It would never do to be deprived of this shop’s cream buns.”

“I know, right?”

“But...you believe my crazy story?”

“I know a little something about stories like these.”

“.....”

“Adolescence Syndrome.”

Mai’s eyebrows twitched.

He’d never specifically heard of any cases where people turned invisible, but... “I can read people’s minds!” or “I can see people’s futures!” or “We swapped bodies!” There were plenty of well-known stories about seemingly supernatural phenomena. Checking any relevant online forum would turn up a mountain of them.

Responsible psychiatrists dismissed it as a suggestive state induced

by emotional instability. Self-proclaimed experts talked about it like it was a new form of panic attack brought about by the rigors of modern society. Regular people just enjoying the crazy stories likely assumed it was some sort of mass hypnosis.

Another popular theory was that it was a mental illness brought about by the stress of reality not living up to the afflicted person's ideals.

The one thing all these explanations had in common was that no one took the condition seriously. Most adults were sure it was all in children's heads.

Somewhere in the storm of casual opinions, people started using *Adolescence Syndrome* as a collective name for these bizarre phenomena—like the one happening to Mai right now.

"Adolescence Syndrome is just an urban legend."

Mai was right. It was an urban legend. No one would normally believe such a thing. Everyone would react like Mai just had. Even if they witnessed something strange happen right in front of them, most would assume they'd imagined it. Even if it happened to them personally, regular people would struggle to accept it. The world they all lived in was a place where fantastical things like this simply couldn't exist—that was common sense.

But Sakuta had good reason to think otherwise.

"I have something to show you. It should be a convincing reason for why I believe you."

"What are you going to show me?" Mai looked dubious.

"Mind coming with me?" he asked.

Mai thought about it.

"...Fine," she said, nodding, her voice barely above a whisper.

4

Sakuta led Mai to a certain spot in a residential area about a ten-minute walk from the station.

"And this is?" she asked, staring up at a seven-story apartment complex.

"My place."

"....."

He felt a suspicious, scornful glare stabbing into his side.

"I'm not gonna try anything."

Under his breath, he added, "Probably."

"What was that?"

"If you decide to seduce me, I'm not sure I'll be able to resist."

“.....”

Mai's lips pursed.

“Oh? Senpai, are you nervous?”

“N-nervous? M-me?”

“There was an audible squeak to your voice...”

“I think nothing of entering the bedroom of some *younger* boy.”

Mai hmphed loudly and walked into the lobby ahead of him. Sakuta followed, trying not to laugh.

They took the elevator to the fifth floor. The third door on the right was Sakuta's apartment.

“I'm home!” he called, stepping inside. No answer. Kaede was normally waiting for him, but he was back at a weird time, so maybe she was sulking. Or just asleep? Maybe too absorbed in a book to notice her brother's return...

“Come on in,” he invited, realizing Mai was still standing in the entrance with her shoes on.

Sakuta's room was right by the front door.

Mai put her schoolbag down and set the paper bag from the station locker next to it, then sat down on the bed, palms down on either side. Sakuta stole a peek inside the paper bag and saw the ears from the bunny-girl costume. She must have been planning to do her wild bunny-girl routine somewhere else.

“Well, at least you keep it tidy,” she said, looking around the room. She didn't sound particularly impressed.

“I just don't own anything.”

“I can tell.”

The bed, his desk, and a chair—there was nothing else here.

“Senpai,” he began.

“Stop,” she said, interrupting him.

“What?”

“Could you not call me *senpai*? It doesn't feel right.”

“Sakurajima?”

“That's too long to use all the time.”

“I could shorten it to Jima? Urp!”

Mai had grabbed his necktie, pulling hard.

“No weird nicknames.”

“I thought it would make us closer!”

“I hate people who don't know their manners,” she growled. There was a real tension here, one that did not allow jokes. Were these strict principles also the result of her acting background?

“In that case...Mai?”

“You don't seem like an Azusagawa, so I'll just call you Sakuta.”

He wondered what her mental image of an Azusagawa looked

like.

“So? What is it you want to show me?”

“First...if you could let go?”

Mai finally released him. Sakuta straightened up, loosened his tie, and undid the buttons on his shirt. Moving smoothly, he also peeled off the T-shirt underneath it, leaving him naked from the waist up.

“Wh-why are you undressing?!” Mai yelped. Uncomfortably averting her gaze. “Y-you said you wouldn’t try anything! Gross! Pervert! Flasher!”

After this stream of insults, she turned her eyes on him again with great trepidation.

“Ah—”

And then she let out a yelp of genuine surprise.

Three macabre scars carved into Sakuta’s chest. It was as though he’d been raked by the claws of a giant monster. They ran from his right shoulder all the way to his left hip.

The scars were raised, like unusually large welts. One glance was all it took to know something was wrong. You could get attacked by a bear and get off with less. If he’d been hit by an excavator’s shovel, that might explain it. Sadly, Sakuta had never fought an excavator.

“Were you attacked by mutants?”

“I had no idea you were an American comics fan.”

“I’ve only seen the movies.”

“.....”

“.....”

Mai was staring fixedly at his scars.

“Those are real?” she inquired at last.

“Do you think I’d be dumb enough to do this with makeup?”

“Can I touch them?”

“Go ahead.”

Mai stood up and reached out, pressing her fingertips lightly against the scars at his shoulder.

“Oh!”

“Don’t make weird noises!”

“They’re a little sensitive. Be gentle?”

“Like this?”

She lightly brushed her fingers along the scars.

“That feels really good.”

Without her expression changing at all, she pinched his side, hard.

“Ow! Ow! Let go!”

“You really seem to be enjoying this.”

“It actually hurts!”

Mai let go, presumably deciding this was a battle she could not win.

“So? How’d you get these scars?”

“I’m not really sure.”

“Huh? What do you mean? You wanted to show me these, right?”

“Actually, no. These don’t really matter. Forget you saw them.”

“How can I? If they don’t matter, why take your shirt off?!”

“I always change the moment I get home, so...habit?”

Sakuta unlocked his desk drawer, took a photo out, and handed it to Mai.

“This is what I wanted to show you.”

“.....?!”

The moment she saw the picture, Mai’s eyes went wide with shock. Then she looked up at Sakuta, grimly demanding an explanation. “What is this?”

The photo depicted a girl in her first year of junior high. Her summer uniform left her arms and legs exposed, making it plain to see that they were covered in purple bruises and painful-looking cuts.

“My sister, Kaede.”

The uniform hid her back and stomach, but Sakuta knew those were blanketed in the same injuries.

“...Was she attacked?”

“No. Just bullied online.”

“...I’m confused.”

That was only natural. Almost everyone introduced to the incident reacted the same way.

“She left a text message unread or something, and one of the class leaders got mad at her. The social media the whole class was using filled up with abuse. ‘You suck,’ ‘You’re so creepy,’ ‘Drop dead,’ ‘You’re so obnoxious,’ ‘Don’t bother coming to school.’”

As he spoke, Sakuta undid his belt.

“And then one day, *that* happened to her body.”

“Really?”

“At first, even I assumed someone did it to her. But by then, she’d already stopped going to school. If she hadn’t left the house, how could anyone attack her? That’s why I thought the stress had gotten so bad, she’d done it to herself.”

He took off his pants, hanging them over the back of the chair so they wouldn’t get wrinkled.

“It’s true that some victims come to think the bullying is their fault,” Mai said. For some reason, she was staring very intently at a corner of the room.

“So I skipped school, staying with her the whole time. I needed to know the truth.”

“Before we get to that...”

“What?”

“Why are you still undressing?”

Sakuta glanced at himself in the mirror. He was only wearing boxers. No, wait, he also had socks on.

“Like I said, I always change as soon as I get home.”

“Then put some clothes on!”

He opened his closet to do just that. As he did, he kept talking. “Where was I?”

“You skipped school to stay with her. What happened?”

“The moment she opened the app on her phone, a new wound sprouted up. Her thigh just...split open. Blood came out...and every post she saw caused more injuries or bruises.”

Almost as if the pain in her heart was carving itself into her flesh.

“.....”

Mai seemed unsure how to respond to this.

“Anyway, that’s why I believe Adolescence Syndrome exists.”

“...It’s not an easy story to believe, but I can’t see why you’d make it up. Or fake this photo.”

Mai handed the picture back. Sakuta returned it to his desk drawer and locked it.

“Was that also when you got the cuts on your chest?”

He nodded.

“Those clearly aren’t from anything human.”

“Still, I have no idea how I got them. I just woke up covered in blood and was rushed to the hospital. Seriously thought I was gonna die.”

“Is that the truth behind the so-called hospitalization incident?”

“Yeah. I’m the one who was hospitalized.”

“That’s the complete opposite! You really can’t trust rumors.”

Mai sighed and sat back down.

As she did, the door opened, and a calico cat slipped in, meowing. Behind it...

“Oh, you’re home?”

A face in panda pajamas popped out from behind the door.

“Er...,” she said, flummoxed.

Sakuta was standing there in his boxers. An older girl was sitting alone on his bed.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

None of them spoke. Three sets of eyes swiveled. Only the cat, Nasuno, was happily rubbing against Sakuta’s legs.

Kaede was the first to break the spell.

“S-sorry!” she yelped, fleeing into the hall. But then she peeped back through the crack of the door, her eyes bouncing back and forth

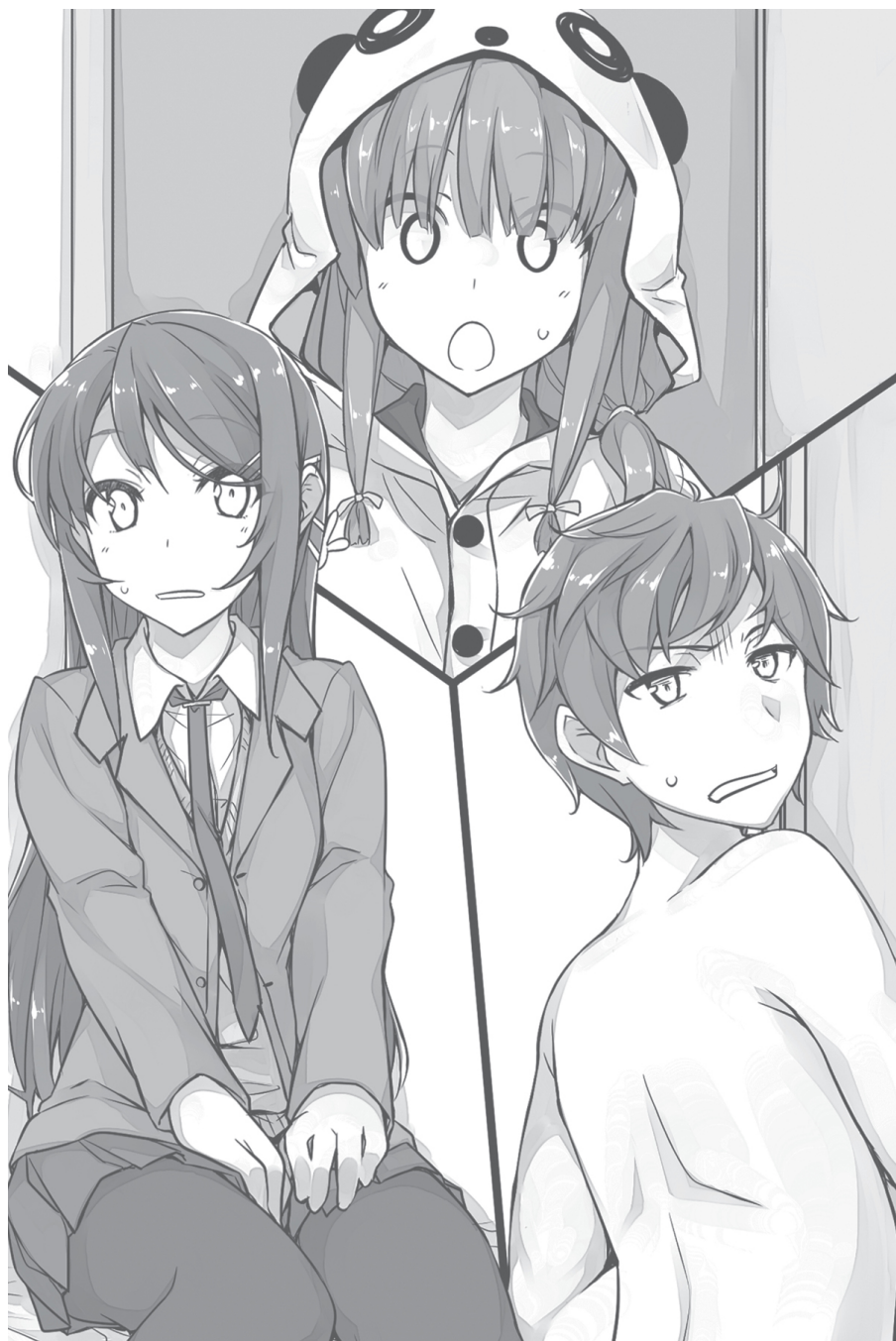
between the two of them several times. Finally, she beckoned to her brother.

“What?” he asked, picking Nasuno up and moving closer. When he reached the doorway, Kaede stretched to put both hands around her mouth and whispered in his ear.

“If you’re going to hire a professional, warn me ahead of time!”

“That’s one hell of an assumption, Kaede.”

“I don’t see what can explain this besides a burning need to indulge your uniform fetish!”



“Where did you even pick up these things?”

“I read a novel last month about a lady in that line of work! She’s a wonderful person who leads sad men to heaven!”

“Well, everyone sees things differently, but I think most people would assume I brought a girlfriend home.”

This seemed like a much more natural conclusion to Sakuta.

“I don’t even want to consider that nightmare scenario.”

“Nightmare, is it?”

“The ultimate nightmare. Like the destruction of the earth itself.”

“Well, I consider the end of the world a fair price to pay for a girlfriend.”

“Are you done yet?” Mai called.

He turned back to the room. Kaede pressed herself up against his back, hands on his right shoulder, hiding herself behind him while peering suspiciously at Mai. Kaede was fairly tall, though, so she wasn’t all that well hidden. Mai could probably spot quite a bit of her.

“This lady didn’t make you buy a vase, did she?”

“No.”

“Did you promise to go check out a painting?”

“Nope.”

“English conversation textbooks...?”

“She isn’t trying to sell anything. Don’t worry. This isn’t some dating scam. She’s a year ahead of me at school.”

“I’m Mai Sakurajima. Nice to meet you.”

When Mai spoke to her, Kaede hid herself in Sakuta’s shadow like a small animal fleeing a carnivore. Her lips were close enough to his back that he could feel her breath as she spoke, even if the voice was too small to make out the words properly.

“Uh,” she said, “nice to meet you. I’m Kaede Azusagawa.”

“Ah.”

“And the cat here is Nasuno.”

He held the cat up so Mai could see. Nasuno meowed again, stretching herself.

“Thanks for telling me that,” Mai said.

Kaede poked her face out for a second, but then she snatched Nasuno from Sakuta’s arms and dashed out of the room. The door slammed behind her.

She talked a lot when it was just her and Sakuta, but if anyone else was around, Kaede always acted like this. When Yuuma had come over, the two of them had only managed to converse when Sakuta stood between them.

“Sorry, she’s painfully shy.”

“Don’t worry; I’m not upset about it. Tell her that for me later,

would you? And I'm glad her injuries have healed up."

Strangely enough, none of her injuries had left any scars. Sakuta was really happy about that. She was a girl, after all. At the same time, it made him wonder why his own scars had persisted. It remained a mystery, but...not one to think about now. He focused on Mai.

Mai had put her hands behind her and was leaning back, crossing her legs.

"I'm surprised she doesn't know who I am."

"Well...she doesn't watch much TV."

"Hmm."

He wasn't sure if Mai had found that explanation convincing.

"Back on topic... Mai, when you left, you said something about wanting to visit a world where no one knew you. How serious are you?"

"One hundred percent serious."

"Really?"

"...Sometimes. Other times, I worry I'll never get cream buns again."

Mai took the cream bun out of her bag and took a bite.

"I'm asking because it's important."

"....."

Mai kept chewing.

He waited a good ten seconds before she swallowed.

"I meant what I said," she explained. "How I feel changes moment to moment."

"Yeah, but..."

"Then let me ask. Why do you want to know?"

Sakuta's eyes turned toward the door. He was checking for Kaede, even though she was long since gone.

"In Kaede's case, distancing her from online stuff seems to have resolved the issue."

She no longer checked social media. No longer read forum posts. No longer joined in class group chats. They'd canceled the contract on Kaede's phone, and Sakuta had thrown it in the ocean. They didn't even have a computer in the house.

"Seems to?"

"The doctor who examined her said, 'You think your stomach will hurt, so it does' and that something along those lines was probably happening. That said, there was no convincing the doctor that the physical injuries weren't self-inflicted."

Ultimately, he had taken the doctor's assessment with a grain of salt. But parts of it seemed eerily accurate. Having her friends turn on her had obviously been rough for Kaede. With her heart in tatters, the

pain she felt began presenting itself on her body as actual injuries. Watching it happen from up close, that seemed like the only possible explanation to Sakuta. The idea that the state of the mind influenced the condition of the body also just seemed to make sense to him. If someone was dreading something, their body wouldn't stay in tip-top shape. Just the sight of a hated food is enough to elicit nausea. People who hate swim class might find themselves running a fever when pool time was approaching. Pretty much everyone experienced *something* along those lines.

All things being equal, even if the specifics and scale were totally different, Sakuta thought the doctor's general theory was right on the money.

"So?"

"I believe Kaede's injuries were caused by the strength of her feelings."

"That much I get. But you think this applies to me, too?"

"I mean, look how you are at school. You act like you're part of the air."

"....."

Mai's expression didn't change. She seemed mildly interested in what he had to say, but her eyes were mostly saying "So?" and silently urging him to continue. This struck him as a feat that would have been beyond anyone but her.

"Uh, like I was saying," he said, breaking eye contact. "I think the best way to avoid making things worse would be for you to go back to work."

He deliberately kept his tone light. There was no reason to grapple with her directly. He'd never win on her turf.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If you're all over our TV screens, no matter how good you are at pretending you're not there, the people around you won't leave you alone. It'll be like before you started this hiatus."

"Hmph."

"Besides, Mai...you've got goals of your own," he said, keeping a close eye on her reaction.

"....."

Her eyebrows definitely twitched. Ever so slightly. If he hadn't been watching for it, Sakuta might not have noticed.

"What goals?" Her voice betrayed no emotions.

"You want to go back to work."

"When did I say that?" she asked, sighing dramatically. Sakuta thought this was another performance.

"If you're not interested, then why were you staring enviously at that movie poster on the train?"

He immediately pressed the attack.

"I liked the novel it's based on! I'm just curious how it turned out."

"You sure you didn't want to play the heroine yourself?"

"You're really pushing it, Sakuta."

She smiled confidently. Her mask wasn't coming off this easily.

Sakuta wasn't giving up, either.

"I think you should do what you want, Mai. You've got the skills and the résumé. Plus a manager who wants you back at work! What's the problem?"

"...To hell with her."

Mai didn't raise her voice. But the emotions underpinning her words were volcanic. Her brows had snapped shut, and she was glaring at him.

"Mind your own business."

He'd clearly stepped on a land mine.

"....."

Mai silently rose to her feet.

"Toilet's down the hall on the right."

"I'm leaving!" she snapped. She grabbed her schoolbag and flung the door open.

"Eep!"

Kaede was right outside, holding a tray with some tea. She'd also changed from her pajamas into a white blouse and a skirt with suspenders.

"Er, uh...I made tea," Kaede stammered, clearly bowled over by Mai's ferocious expression.

"Thanks," Mai said, flashing her a smile. She grabbed a cup and downed it in a single gulp. "That was lovely."

She placed the cup politely back on the tray and headed for the front door.

"Uh, wait, Mai!" Sakuta called, scrambling to follow.

"What?" she spat, putting her shoes on.

"You forgot this!" he said, holding out the bag with the bunny-girl outfit.

"Keep it!"

"Then at least let me walk you—"

"No." She cut him off, clearly irritated. "I live close by."

And with that, she was gone.

Sakuta was about to follow, but...

"Don't! You'll get arrested!" Kaede yelled.

She pointed at his clothes, or lack thereof, and he was forced to abandon the idea.

The two of them stood awkwardly in the hall.

“.....”

“.....”

After a few seconds of silence, they both looked down at the bag. And the bunny-girl outfit inside it.

“What’s that for?” Kaede asked.

“Well, for now...”

He took out the ears, and since Kaede was still holding a tray and unable to resist, he stuck them on her head.

“I-I’m not wearing it!”

She scurried back into the living room, careful not to spill anything.

It would never do to force her, so he abandoned the idea for the moment. He put the outfit away in his closet, certain the day would come when he could enjoy it again.

“That’s fine.”

Things with Mai were not so fine. He’d really pissed her off.

“Guess I’ll have to apologize tomorrow...”



the price of making up

1

Unfortunately, the day after he pissed Mai off came and went without Sakuta finding a chance to apologize.

He'd hoped they might end up on the same train that morning, but no such luck. Not wanting to waste time, the moment first period ended, he went straight to Class 3-1 (her class), but she was nowhere to be found.

He tried asking a girl near the classroom door, but she just looked annoyed. "Sakurajima? I dunno, is she even here today?" she said before immediately turning back to her friends. "So yesterday..."

"....."

He scanned the Mai-less room. Boys laughing like idiots, girls squealing at each other's stories—the room was filled with noise. Classrooms between periods were the same no matter what year the students were in. He imagined Mai sitting alone, surrounded by this commotion, and felt a pang in his chest.

"Where's she sit?"

"Huh? Oh, over there."

The girl pointed at the back seat in the row second from the windows. After confirming that there was a schoolbag hanging from it, Sakuta returned to his own classroom.

He visited her class during every break after that, but Mai was never there. Her bag always was, and the textbook for her next subject was out on the desk, so she was clearly here—but his efforts to find her were in vain.

His final chance was after school. Sakuta made a beeline for the exit the instant homeroom ended. He kept a close eye on his surroundings, searching for Mai. He waited like that for twenty minutes.

When it became clear he'd missed her, he left the gates behind, checking along the road on the way to the station. No sign of her. Mai wasn't waiting on the platform in Shichirigahama Station, either.

Not only had he been unable to make up with her, he hadn't even caught a glimpse of her.

When this continued for three more days, even an idiot would realize she was intentionally avoiding him.

And unfortunately, she clearly had no plans to stop.

Two weeks passed like this. Mai was still avoiding Sakuta completely.

The day before, he'd stood in the station for an hour hoping to catch her, but that got nowhere. She must have walked all the way to the next station.

This was a tough nut to crack.

Perhaps she'd mastered these techniques avoiding paparazzi. It was like she could turn to mist.

"That land mine I stepped on was even worse than I thought."

Mai's evident determination was making that fact clearer by the day.

Urging her to go back to work had made her angry, but the trigger had almost certainly been the word *manager*.

Was this the reason she'd gone on hiatus and why she was hesitant to go back to work despite harboring a clear desire to do so?

Sakuta used a school computer in an attempt to ascertain why Mai Sakurajima had taken a break from acting, but all he found was uninformed speculation and malicious rumors. **Overworked? Gotta be something to do with a producer. Man problems.** Nothing worth reading.

His only option was to ask her directly, but that wasn't possible as long as she kept avoiding him. He was at an impasse.

Certain that chasing her was getting him nowhere, Sakuta decided one day that he needed a change of pace. He was on cleaning duty, but once he wrapped that up, he headed for the science lab.

To see his other friend.

He knocked on the door and opened it without waiting for an answer.

"Hope I'm not interrupting," he said, shutting the door behind him.

"You are. Go away." A curt response.

There was only one student in the rather large lab. She was at the desk the teacher used during classes, in front of the blackboard. On the desk were an alcohol burner and a beaker. She didn't bother looking in Sakuta's direction.

She was only slightly over five feet tall, on the small side, and wore glasses. The white lab coat over her uniform certainly drew the eye. She had unusually good posture, which added to the "cool" vibe she gave off.

Her name was Rio Futaba. A second-year student here at Minegahara High. She'd been in the same class as Sakuta and Yuuma

the year before. She was the sole member of the Science Club. The experiments she did there had caused the school's power to fail and started a small fire, so she had a reputation for being weird. Her signature white lab coat only made things worse.

Sakuta pulled a nearby chair over, sitting down across the desk from Rio.

"How you been?"

"Nothing's happened worth reporting to you."

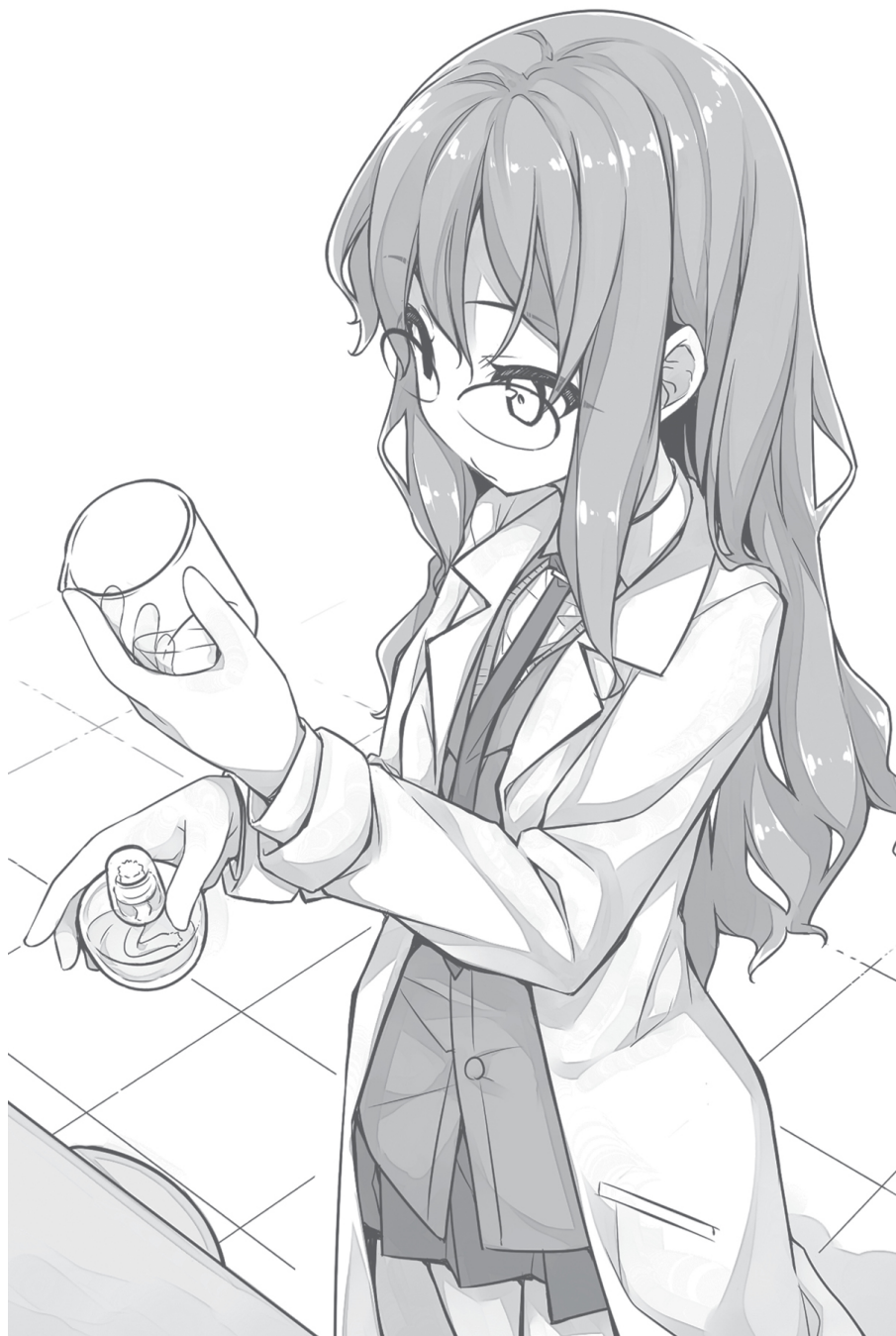
"Tell me something fun!"

"You sound like a typical bored high school student. Don't waste my time with that nonsense."

She looked up long enough to glare. Maybe he really was interrupting.

"I'm a student, and I'm bored, so you're right on the money."

Rio ignored his attempt to keep the conversation going and used a match to light the alcohol burner. Then she filled the beaker with water and placed it on the flame. Some sort of experiment?



“What’s gotten into you, Azusagawa?”

“I’ve got nothing to report, either.”

“Liar. You’re obsessed with a former child actress.”

There was no need to puzzle out who she meant. That could only be Mai.

“She escaped that label a long time ago. She’s a real actress now.”

But since she was on hiatus, perhaps that term didn’t quite apply, either.

“Who told you that anyway?”

“Stupid question.”

“Right, it would have to be Kunimi.”

Yuuma was the only one who knew what was going on with him. And the only people in school who would talk to the weirdo in the white lab coat were Yuuma and Sakuta. QED.

“He’s worried about you. You’re getting yourself mixed up in trouble again.”

“Hey, what do you mean by *again*?”

“Can’t even imagine what it would take to worry about someone like you. Kunimi is too pure for this world.”

“If you ever figure out how he does it, you’ll have to tell me.”

The phrase *great personality* was coined for Yuuma specifically. Sakuta believed this wholeheartedly.

Last year, when talk of the hospitalization incident was flooding the school, Yuuma was the only one who kept treating Sakuta the same way. Not only did he not believe the rumors, but when they were paired together in gym class, he’d directly asked if they were true.

“Of course they aren’t.”

“I figured.” Yuuma had grinned.

“...You’ll take my word for it?”

Sakuta had been taken aback. The bulk of the class had immediately believed the gossip, distancing themselves without even bothering to ask.

“I mean, it’s not true, right?”

“No, but...”

“I’ll take the word of the person in front of me over some anonymous Internet source any day.”

“You’re the worst, Kunimi.”

“Huh? Where’d that come from?”

“Between your face and your personality, you’re the enemy of all men.”

“Riiiiight.”

That had been about a year ago. He and Yuuma were still thick as

thieves.

As Sakuta stared vacantly at the burner flame, thoughts still abuzz...

"The world just isn't fair," Rio said, pity evident in the gaze she leveled on him. "To think that people could turn out so differently."

"I'd rather not be compared to Kunimi."

"I only do it out of spite. Pay no mind."

"How could I not? But, well, guys like him in particular always have freakish fetishes they keep under wraps. That's how the world maintains balance in the distribution of amazing personalities."

"You're at rock bottom today, Azusagawa," Rio sighed.

"How so?"

"You've got a friend seriously worried about you, and here you are talking about him behind his back."

He couldn't very well argue with that.

"...The gap between me and Kunimi overwhelms me sometimes."

"That, and..." Rio allowed a meaningful pause.

"What?"

The water in the beaker was starting to boil.

"You finally got over Makinohara."

"...Kunimi said the same thing. Why bring her up?"

"You should know the answer to that better than anyone."

Rio killed the flame on the burner and poured the hot water into a mug. Then she added instant coffee. Apparently, she was *not* doing an experiment.

"Can I get a cup?"

"I'm afraid I only have the one mug. You could use this mixing cylinder?"

The long, thin glass tube was a foot tall. Rio seemed to think this was a viable option.

"If I tried to drink coffee out of that thing, it would all pour out at once, and I'd burn myself."

"We should do an experiment to see if your hypothesis is correct. Besides, that is the only other available container."

"Why not use the beaker you boiled the water in?"

"That would be boring," she grumbled. But she nevertheless added some instant coffee to the remaining water in the beaker.

"Any sugar?"

"I don't use it."

Rio pulled a plastic bottle out of a drawer and placed it in front of him. The label read MANGANESE DIOXIDE.

"You sure this is safe?"

"That's probably sugar inside. It's white anyway."

"There are countless other white powders. Even I know that."

But he also knew that manganese dioxide was black.

“Best to try only a little bit at a time to make sure,” Rio suggested. Sakuta elected to take his coffee black instead.

Rio looked vaguely disappointed. She lit the alcohol burner again. He wondered if it was for an experiment this time, but the answer became apparent when she put a grill over it and began toasting a dried squid. Its legs curled up on the heat.

“Can I have some?”

He wasn’t sure if it would go well with coffee, but the fragrant smell was making him hungry.

Rio tore off a single squid leg and gave it to him.

Munching on that, Sakuta finally broached his main topic.

“Futaba...is it possible to just stop being able to see a person?”

“If you’re worried about your eyes, see an optometrist.”

“That’s not what I meant... Like, what if they’re definitely there, but people can’t see them. Like they’re invisible.”

In Mai’s case, not only did people not see her, they couldn’t hear her voice, either, so *invisible* wasn’t quite right...but might as well start there.

“Is this for when you sneak into the girls’ toilets?”

“I’m not into scat, so at least make it the locker rooms when you bad-mouth me.”

“You’re a rascal and always will be.”

Rio reached into her bag and pulled out her phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“The police.”

“They can’t take action until a crime has taken place.”

“Good point.”

She put the phone away.

“But for your original question, the process of sight is covered in our science textbook. Read the sections on light and lenses.”

She produced the book in question and slid it across the desk toward him.

“I’m asking you because that sounds like too much work.”

Sakuta sent the book back.

Rio took a bite of squid, unconcerned.

“Light is the key. Light strikes objects, and the light reflecting off them enters our eyes, allowing us to perceive colors and shapes. In darkness, without light, we can’t see a thing.”

“Reflections...”

“If that isn’t making sense, think of sound instead. Like how dolphins communicate with sound waves.”

“You mean...how they measure distance by judging how sound waves reflect off things?”

“Yes. They can even tell the shape of objects. Just like a ship’s sonar. It can be hard to picture with light because we’re only really conscious of light hitting our eyes when it’s really bright.”

“Huh.”

“But glass is translucent and doesn’t reflect light, so it’s harder to see.”

“Ohhh, yeah. That’s true.”

Did that mean light wasn’t reaching Mai for some reason? For a movie star on hiatus, that phrasing just sounded spiteful.

Sakuta wondered if he should consider the idea that, like colorless, translucent glass, Mai’s body wasn’t reflecting light. Sadly, even if that were the case, it still left a lot of things unexplained.

Like people not hearing her voice. Or how some could see her while others couldn’t. Her situation seemed much more complicated.

“Well, I think that helped.”

“Really?” Rio asked, deeply suspicious.

“Futaba, you think I’m an idiot, right?”

“No.”

“Then you think I’m a mega idiot?”

“You know exactly what I’m trying to say, but you waste time asking anyway. It’s obnoxious.”

“So harsh.”

“I think you *can* take a hint, but you’re obnoxious enough to pretend you can’t.”

“Okay, I’m sorry! Please, no more barbs!”

“The way you wriggle out of it like that is even worse.”

Rio impassively took a sip of coffee.

Sakuta decided it would be best to get the conversation back on track.

“Uh, let’s be a little more specific. Say I’m sitting here right in front of you. Is it possible you wouldn’t be able to see me?”

“If I close my eyes.”

“If your eyes are open and looking directly at me?”

“It’s possible.”

That was the opposite of the answer he’d expected. What’s more, there had been no hesitation.

“I just have to be focused on something else or be really out of it. So much so, I don’t notice you’re here.”

“No, that’s not what I...”

“Hear me out. Let’s stop looking at this in terms of light. Where sight is concerned, the workings of the human brain can have more of an effect than the actual physics involved.”

Rio must have run out of coffee, because she filled another beaker and placed it above the alcohol lamp.

“For example, to your eyes, I might look small, but to a child, I’d look pretty big.”

“You’re objectively big, Futaba. You try to hide it under the white lab coat, but even then, I can tell.”

His gaze locked onto the swell of her chest.

“Y-you leave my breasts out of this!”

She folded her arms protectively across herself. Very feminine.

“Oh, sorry, sensitive subject?”

“You have no concept of tact or shame, do you?”

“I must have dropped mine somewhere nearby.”

He checked around, searching for them.

“If you aren’t gonna listen seriously, leave. End of lecture!” Rio abandoned her seat.

“Sorry, I promise I’ll listen. And not look at your tits.”

“Then stop talking about them!”

Honestly, he was more than willing to promise not to look but wasn’t sure he could avoid it completely. His gaze was unconsciously drawn to them, and without adjustments at a genetic level, it would continue to be a struggle for him.

He took a sip of coffee, then changed the subject.

“So what you’re saying is...what we see is subjective?”

“Correct. We avoid seeing things we don’t want to see. The human brain can easily accomplish such a feat.”

People talked about pretending not to see things all the time: Out of sight, out of mind. Didn’t even notice. It escaped my attention. There were plenty of related idioms, so the concept was a familiar one.

But what Rio was talking about seemed to be directly refuting his vague notions of what was happening to Mai.

To put it bluntly, Sakuta’s working theory had been that the reason people couldn’t see her was because Mai was acting like the air. He thought the cause lay with her.

But Rio spoke like the issues all stemmed from the observer. According to her premise, the thoughts or intentions of the one being observed didn’t matter.

“There’s something called the Theory of Observation,” Rio said, throwing the next pitch before Sakuta could fully digest these new ideas.

“The what?” he gaped, blinking at her.

“To grossly oversimplify it, everything that exists only exists once someone has observed it. Sounds rather outlandish at first, right?” Rio asked. She didn’t seem to hold a strong opinion about it, herself. “You know about the cat in the box, right? Schrödinger’s cat.”

“Heard the name, at least.”

Rio pulled an empty cardboard box out from under the desk and plopped it down in front of Sakuta.

“Say there’s a cat in this box.”

She found a piggy bank shaped like a lucky cat and put that in the container. The physics teacher was using it to store five-hundred-yen coins. It seemed suspiciously light.

“Along with some radioisotopes that release radiation once an hour.”

She added the beaker full of boiling water.

“Finally, some poison gas, the lid of which will open if it detects that radiation. If the lid opens, the cat will breathe the poison gas. Assume this is always fatal.”

She added the plastic bottle labeled MANGANESE DIOXIDE.

“Then you close the lid and wait thirty minutes,” Rio said, putting a lid on the box. “Now, here we have a box prepared thirty minutes earlier.”

“Like a cooking show?”

Rio ignored the comment.

“What do you think has happened to the cat?”

“Uh...so these radioisotopes could release radiation at any time within that hour? And if they do, the lid on the poison gas opens.”

Rio nodded.

“So if only thirty minutes has passed, that’s half the hour, so...the odds are fifty percent?”

“I’m astonished! You actually understood.”

“If I couldn’t follow this much, I’m either *really* stupid or wasn’t listening in the first place.”

“So is the cat alive or dead?”

“Well, it’s fifty-fifty, right? We could give the box a shake and find out.”

“The box is made of steel and fixed in place so it can’t move.”

She pointed at the box, which was *clearly* cardboard.

“Then I have faith it’s still alive!”

“Which side you place your chips on doesn’t actually matter here.”

“Then why ask?”

“The only way to determine the cat’s state is to look at it.”

“That’s surprisingly ordinary.”

Rio opened the lid. Naturally, the contents were still a lucky cat bank, a beaker, and a bottle labeled MANGANESE DIOXIDE.

“The moment the lid is opened, the cat’s state is determined. In other words, until we open the lid, the cat is both dead and alive. According to quantum mechanics anyway.”

“That makes no sense. What if it died ten minutes after we closed

the lid? There's no need to wait another twenty minutes for the lid to open. The cat's still dead."

To the cat, at least, its life was over. Supposedly, they have nine... but a dead cat is a dead cat.

"I said it was outlandish, didn't I? Well, even if you ignore the quantum interpretation, I think the thought experiment has a ring of truth to it."

"What truth?" Sakuta thought it all sounded rather fishy.

"Humans only see the world the way they wish to see it. The rumors about you are a perfect example, Azusagawa. People believe the rumors but not the truth. Extend the analogy to the real world—you're the cat in the box, and the rest of the student body the observers."

The subjective impressions of the people observing took priority over the actual contents of the box... That was what Rio seemed to be getting at. Sakuta's perspective didn't matter, only what the observers thought of him.

"That's not funny..."

But this also didn't quite match up with what was happening to Mai. Sakuta could see her, other people couldn't, and he had no idea what conditions were causing her to go unseen.

All of this was interesting, but the pieces still weren't falling into place.

It was questionable whether real-world physics could ever explain a phenomenon as dubious as Adolescence Syndrome. There were parts of what he had just learned that seemed like potential clues, but the more he talked to Rio, the more complicated everything seemed.

Maybe what was happening to Mai couldn't be solved just by her going back to work. Sakuta felt a sinking feeling in his chest. Everything Rio talked about was from the observers' perspective, so... maybe a change on Mai's end wouldn't be enough.

"Additionally, observation has been proven to change outcomes in some situations," Rio said.

"Really?"

"It's called the double-slit experiment. If I boil it down to just the conclusion...in cases where only the outcome was observed, the experiment results differed from when observations were also taken at the midpoint."

"So, like, when the Japan team has a soccer match and all I see is the final score on the news, they win, but if I actually watch the match, they always lose?"

"I'm speaking strictly about particles on a micro level. The particle's positions exist in terms of probability—not as matter, but in the form of waves. Observing them constricts them to the form of

matter.”

“But this micro stuff, banded together, forms people and things, right?”

Molecules, atoms, electrons...even Sakuta knew that’s what people and things were made of.

“If what I’ve described can happen on the macro level, your interpretation is fine. Also, for the sake of the Japan team, you’d better not watch any more soccer. Seriously, never again.”

Sound advice. As he nodded appreciatively, a voice came on the loudspeaker.

“Yuuma Kunimi, Class 2-2. Please meet with the basketball team adviser, Mr. Sano, in the teacher’s office.”

“...What did he do?”

“He’s not you, Azusagawa. It’s probably just reviewing the team practice schedule.”

Rio didn’t sound interested, but she definitely had Yuuma’s back.

He’d turned to look at the speaker, which meant he also saw the clock next to it. It was just after three.

“Oh, I’ve gotta get to work.”

“Then go.”

“Thanks a lot. For the coffee, too.”

“Thank the Science Club adviser. It isn’t my coffee.”

Rio showed him the name written on the lid of the instant coffee jar.

“Well, who’s gonna notice a few spoonfuls missing?” Sakuta said.

He stood up, slung his bag over his shoulder, and headed for the door.

But as he reached for it, an idea hit him, and he looked back. Rio was adjusting the flame on a Bunsen burner, presumably getting ready to do a real experiment at last.

“Futaba.”

“Mm?”

Her eyes stayed glued to the blue flame.

“You handling this Kunimi thing okay?”

“.....”

She looked up at him, eyes wavering.

“I’m...”

She quickly tried to answer, but the words caught in her throat. She couldn’t even say she was fine. Her voice had squeaked, and he could tell she was straining to keep it from showing on her face.

“I’m learning to get used to it,” she said while smiling weakly, abandoning the idea of insisting she was fine.

There was no comfort Sakuta could offer. All he could do was bear witness to Rio’s doomed love from the sidelines.

“You’ll be late for work,” she said, jerking her chin to make him scam.

And with that, Sakuta left the science lab.

As he closed the door behind him, he found himself muttering, “Getting used to it? That just means you can’t get over it.”

2

“Azusagawa!” his manager shouted. “Take your break before the dinner rush.”

“Got it.”

Sakuta headed for the break area that doubled as the men’s changing room at the back of the restaurant. There, he found Yuuma coming out from behind the lockers, having just finished getting into his uniform. He’d come straight from practice yet didn’t look at all worn-out.

“Yo,” Yuuma said, noticing Sakuta. He was tying his apron on.

“Mm,” Sakuta grunted, scowling at Yuuma’s pleasant smile.

“Break?”

“I’d be on the floor otherwise.”

“Fair... Okay, I’m all set.”

He tugged the apron strings tight and checked himself over in the mirror.

“Oh, right, Sakuta,” Yuuma said, as if remembering something.

“Mm?”

Yuuma sat down at the table and poured himself a cup of tea from the pot. He took a long sip.

“You’re hiding things from me.”

“Phrasing. Are you supposed to be my girlfriend?” Sakuta jibed, trying to cover his surprise. Rio’s heartbreak was the first thing that came to mind, but Yuuma soon made it clear he was talking about something else entirely.

“I’m not kidding around. I mean the thing with Kamisato.”

“Ohhh...”

Somewhat relieved, Sakuta still looked away. He didn’t really want to talk about that, either. But Yuuma had clearly found out about Saki Kamisato summoning him to the rooftop two weeks earlier.

“You picked a real winner, Kunimi.”

“Right? She’s great.”

“She told me not to talk to you ever again.”

“She wants to monopolize me! Her love is so strong.”

“She said your stock drops if you talk to me. How much are you

going for on the market?”

“Yeah, well...sorry!” Yuuma clapped both palms together, bowing his head.

“You’re something else.”

“How so?”

“All these leading statements, yet I can’t get you to gripe about her even once.”

“Well, I’m in love with her. She can get carried away sometimes, but she’s honest with her emotions! She’s a great girl.”

Sakuta thought she could stand to be a little *less* honest...

“You sound like the misguided wife in an abusive relationship,” he said.

“You mean like the type that goes, ‘I swear he’s nice sometimes’? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, don’t worry about me. Whatever Kamisato says is no skin off my teeth.”

“You could stand to care a *little*,” Yuuma laughed.

“And I guess I should say sorry.”

“For what?”

“Nobody wants to hear someone bitch about their girlfriend.”

“Don’t sweat it, man.”

“Kamisato wouldn’t appreciate you saying that.”

“That’s definitely true.” Yuuma grinned again. “But that’s whatever. Sakuta, don’t get any weird ideas. If you start avoiding me ‘for my sake’ or something, I’ll be seriously pissed.”

“Don’t blame me if that leads to bad blood between you lovebirds.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. But I’m pretty sure all her anger will just get directed back to you.”

That sounded way worse.

“Nah, come on, man. That’s not right!”

“You said it’s no skin off your teeth, right?” Yuuma smiled like he’d just seized a victory. “Just goes to show that a man capable of asking a lady if she’s on her period is made of sterner stuff. You sure your heart’s not solid steel?”

Yuuma laughed heartily. Then he glanced at his watch.

“Aw crap, it’s time,” he observed, punching his time card.

He headed straight to the floor, making sure the manager saw him.

But for some reason, he was back in the break room less than a minute later. Had he forgotten something? What was there even to forget?

However, Yuuma had clearly come back for Sakuta, looking like he had something else to say.

“What?”

“That reporter’s here again.”

Though Yuuma’s tone and expression were stable, Sakuta could nevertheless read the concern they masked. He knew full well Sakuta would not exactly be thrilled by this news.

Ignoring mandated break times, Sakuta went back on the floor and made a beeline for her table. There he found a woman in her late twenties, sitting alone at a booth that seated four. She was wearing a short-sleeved blouse in a pleasant spring color, along with a skirt that stopped just below her knees. Her natural makeup didn’t call attention to itself. The overall effect made her look intelligent, like a TV news reporter. Which she was...

“Can I take your order?” Sakuta asked, strictly professional.

“Nice to see you again, too.”

“Have we met?”

“So that’s how you want to play it? Then let me introduce myself. Here’s my card.”

With practiced ease, the woman offered up a business card.

A TV station logo. Reporting division. The name *Fumika Nanjou* emblazoned in the center.

He knew who she was, of course. He’d first met Fumika while his sister was being bullied. She’d been working on a piece about junior high bullying at the time. By now, she’d been dropping by for a couple of years already.

“What is it today?”

“I’m in town for a story on raw whitebait, but I had the evening off so figured I’d touch base.”

There was a note of forced cheerfulness to her tone, but Sakuta didn’t let it get to him. Fumika was only after one thing. She’d found out about Adolescence Syndrome while working on the bullying story, which had sparked a personal curiosity. Naturally, she wasn’t about to believe an urban legend outright, but she’d learned enough to keep herself from being a pure skeptic. And if by chance it was real, the news alone would be a huge scoop, so she couldn’t just let it drop. She’d admitted as much to him once.

“Maybe get yourself a hot date with a baseball player instead.”

“Tempting, but during the season, the top players are *always* working.”

It was six in the evening. That meant game time.

“And I can get a date right here,” she said, shooting Sakuta a meaningful stare.

“Not into old women, sorry.”

“You’re such a child! Can’t appreciate my adult charms.”

She cupped her chin on one palm, looking up at him.

"I can tell you've gained weight in the last few months. You might want to work on those upper arms."

".....!"

Her eyebrows shot up. He'd definitely gotten under her skin. She leaned back in the booth.

"You're so uncute," she said.

"I'd rather be cool. Your order?"

"One Sakuta to go."

"You seem to have lost your mind," he replied, without emotion. "Would you like to order an ambulance instead?"

"Cheesecake and a hot coffee," she demanded, not even glancing at the menu. Fumika ordered the same thing every time she came here. This was a habit Sakuta usually associated with men.

"Anything else?"

"You still won't talk about it?" She pulled her phone out of her pocket, checking her e-mail. "I'd settle for a photo of the scar on your chest."

"Not happening."

"Never?" She flicked a finger, scrolling past something on her screen.

"Are you gonna let me photograph you naked in return?"

"Sure, why not?"

"You're surprisingly frisky."

"For personal use only, mind? If it winds up online, I'd lose my job."

Sakuta decided he shouldn't engage her further and turned to go. But a few steps away, an idea struck him.

"Um," he began, turning back.

"Mm?" She didn't look up from her phone.

"Nanjou..." He hesitated a moment, then asked, "Do you know Mai Sakurajima?"

"Who doesn't?"

She still hadn't looked up.

"Do you know why she quit the business?"

He knew Fumika covered celebrity gossip sometimes.

"....."

She was looking at him, surprised—clearly taken aback by the question. But this soon gave way to curiosity. Now she wanted to know *why* he'd asked.

He could tell that much from her face, but she didn't voice the question.

"I know things that weren't made public, at the least."

"Then..."

“So? Is this a request from a child? Or an equal exchange between grown-ups?”

“Don’t treat me like a kid.”

“Fine. Then I’m not telling you for free.”

“If one photo of me will do it...”

“Heh-heh. Then we have ourselves a deal.”

It was like he’d flipped a switch. Fumika put her phone back in her purse and glanced at the seat across from her. Sakuta took a seat. Two grown-ups, sharing a table.

Sakuta worked until nine, then stopped at a convenience store on the way home. He passed through deserted residential streets before finally reaching his apartment after a ten-minute stroll.

He took the elevator straight to the fifth floor, where he found someone waiting outside his apartment door.

Mai was sitting against the wall in her school uniform. Arms around her knees. Knees and thighs pressed tightly together, only her lower legs apart. She must have stalked someone past the auto lock below.

When he approached, she glared balefully up at him.

“You’re finally home.”

“I was at work.”

“Where?”

“The family restaurant by the station.”

“Ohhh...”

“Mai.”

“What?”

He clapped his hands together. Then he held up two fingers. Next, he made a big circle with his arms over his head. Finally, he made glasses with his thumbs and index fingers, then held them up to his eyes. He had mimed out “I can see your panties” with classic Japanese gestures.

“Charades?” she asked, like he was the idiot.

Apparently, she had failed to realize he could see white panties through her black tights. How defenseless!

He gave up and said it out loud. “I can see your panties.”

Mai gasped and looked down at herself.

“It’s hardly a problem for me if some younger guy sees my underwear!” she sputtered but hastily put her hand between her legs, tugging her skirt down over it. Sakuta wondered why he found it sexier seeing her try to hide them than when they were on full display.

“You’ve turned bright red.”

“I-I’m very worked up right now!”

“Wow, everyone’s feeling frisky tonight.”

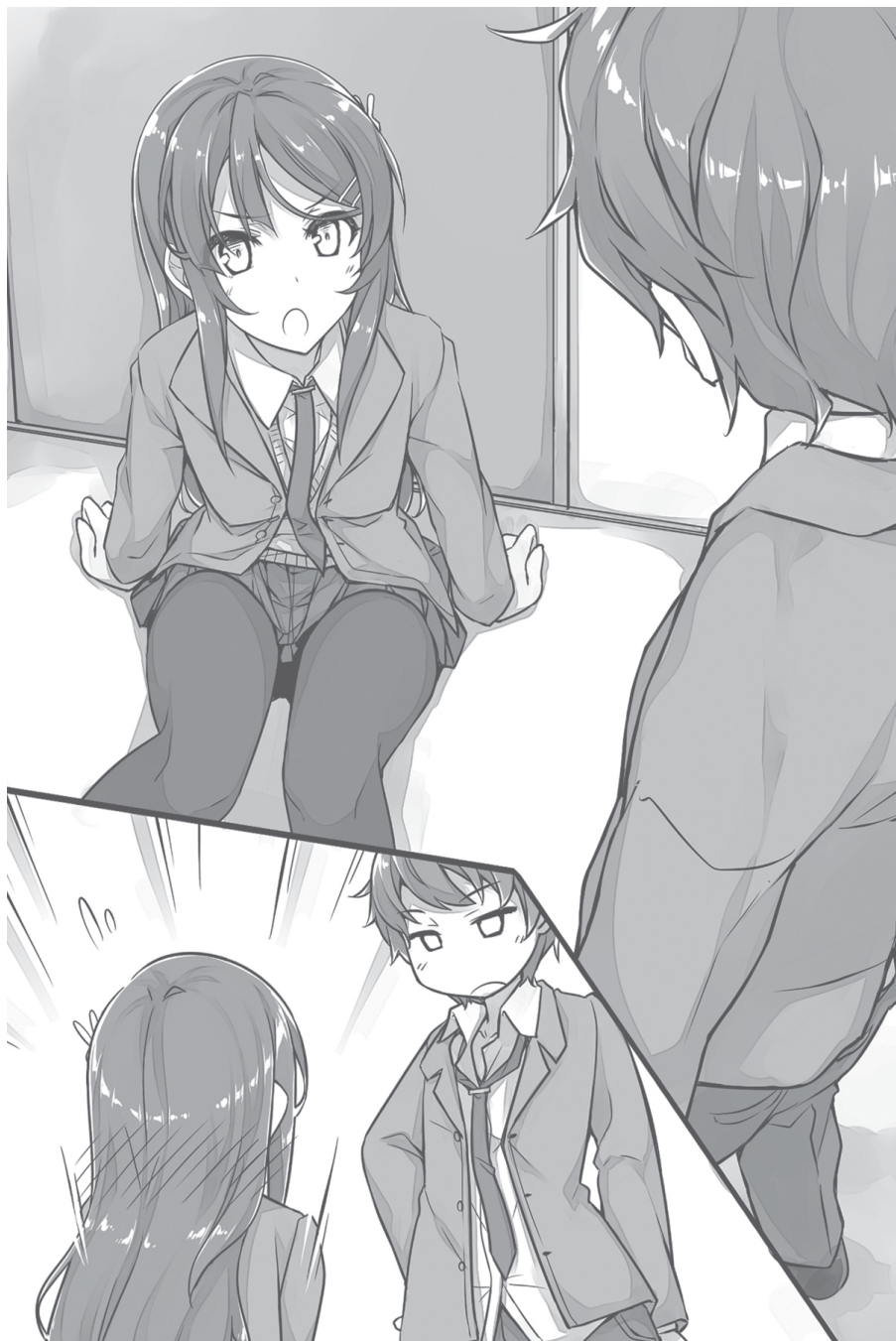
“I’m not being frisky!”

Mai gave him a long, hard glare.

“Standing up should solve the problem.”

He held out a hand.

Mai reached up, but just before she touched his hand, she yanked it back, like she’d just remembered she was still mad at him. She snorted once, then stood up without his help.



"I'm not touching a boy's hand—no telling *what else* it's been wrapped around."

She flashed him a triumphant grin. She seemed to be enjoying herself. But this moment was immediately undermined by a loud growl from her stomach.

"....."

"....."

"Gosh, I'm sooo hungry," he said, in the phoniest voice he could muster.

"Do you have to rub it in?"

"Bad habit, I know."

Sakuta took a cream bun out of his shopping bag.

She hesitated, then reached for it. He felt like he was feeding a stray cat.

Mai ripped the package open and tore into the cream bun.

"So when did you become the perpetually hungry type?"

"....."

She continued chewing in silence.

Only when she'd swallowed properly did she snap, "I can't shop," like this was Sakuta's fault.

"Ohhh. That explains it..."

If nobody could see her, then Mai obviously couldn't go through the checkout line. He'd already seen the woman at the station stall totally ignore her efforts to buy a cream bun. It had been painful to watch.

"The last two weeks, more and more places can't see me. Everything around Fujisawa Station is a wash now. Even if I order online, they can't see me, so I can't accept deliveries."

"Wanna come in?" Sakuta suggested, pulling out his key and pointing at the door. "I can be charitable."

"*That's* dubious phrasing," Mai groused, glaring at him.

Her apparent anger wasn't at all frightening. It was actually kinda cute.

"Then I'll treat you."

"No. If I went into a boy's place at this time of day, it'd be like telling him he can do whatever he wants."

"I see! So that's how you signal consent. Good to know."

"Forget I said that."

She dropped a karate chop on his head.

"Ow."

"Stop goofing around and help me shop."

"Sure, just hang on a second. Gotta let my sister know what's up."

"Fine. I'll be waiting downstairs."

As Sakuta put his key in the door, Mai turned her back on him, heading for the elevators.

Kaede had been waiting for Sakuta to come home, and it took a good fifteen minutes of explaining to get her to settle down. It then took the same amount of time for Mai to get over waiting that long. The grocery store was by the station, a ten-minute walk, so by the time they arrived, it was already past ten.

This store closed at eleven, so there was still a decent crowd. Lots of young men in suits. Likely bachelors stopping by on their way home from work.

Sakuta shopped here regularly but hadn't often come this late. It felt like a whole new experience.

And that feeling was only enhanced by the fact that he wasn't alone. And the person with him was *the* Mai Sakurajima.

Mai was walking ahead of him, choosing her groceries. He was rather enjoying pushing the cart along behind her. He couldn't keep the grin off his face.

"We definitely look like a couple."

"What did you say?" Mai asked, looking up from the carrots in her hands.

"Nothing."

"It's fine. Nobody here can see me."

So she *had* heard him.

"It's my first time staying over, and you've agreed to cook me dinner."

"The more time you waste on dumb fantasies, the stupider you get."

She put the carrot in her right hand back on the shelf.

"Okay, serious question."

"Really, now?" She seemed to think that was highly questionable.

"So that carrot you're waving around. What does it look like to everyone else? Is it floating?"

"They can't see it, either," she said. Apparently, she'd already tested this.

She demonstrated, dangling the carrot in front of a businessman's face. He didn't react.

"See?"

"Guess you're right."

"I tried putting everything in a basket and taking that to the checkout line, but it was no use. I mean, we already know they can't see my clothes, either."

That was true. This clearly wasn't just her body turning invisible.

"Maybe everything I touch turns invisible."

"By that logic, the entire earth would be invisible."

"You're sure thinking on a grand scale."

"I'm a man meant for greater things."

"Yeah, sure," she said, brushing it off.

"But, uh, if you touch me, what happens then?"

"Is that a roundabout way to trick me into holding your hand?"

"No, just an experiment."

If all he wanted was a touch, that had already happened. When she'd visited his room, she'd touched Sakuta's chest scars. She'd also shoved his shoulder on the train, while joking about getting pregnant.

But neither of these had resulted in Sakuta becoming invisible. It seemed likely the ingredients she'd put in the cart he was pushing would be visible once he reached the checkout line.

What he wanted to know was what happened while she was touching him.

"If that's the reason, I'm not doing it."

She turned and walked off toward the meat section.

He called after her, keeping a close eye on her reaction. "The truth is that was just me trying to hide my embarrassment. I do actually just want to hold your hand."

"And?" she asked, smiling over her shoulder.

"Will you do me the honor of being the first girl to hold my hand?"

"A little creepy...but I'll take it."

Mai let him catch up, then they walked side by side. Sakuta felt her warmth pressed against him. She'd put her arm around his.

Surprised, he felt his heart racing.

Mai was tall enough that her face was just a glance away. So close he felt like he could count her eyelashes.

"....."

The longer she held on to him, the more conscious he was of the side boob pressed into his arm. He'd learned a lot about them while she'd been wearing that bunny-girl outfit, but they were definitely on the generous side for someone with a build as slim as hers.

And she smelled good. His head was swimming.

"Your mind went straight to the gutter, right?"

"I think it went a hundred times deeper than you're assuming," he admitted.

Mai let go of him.

"But you're so grown-up, that would never bother you," he said.

"Yes. A younger boy having erotic fantasies about me is nothing."

Feeling stubborn, Mai grabbed his arm again.

"Ahhh!"

Even he knew that noise was weird.

A nearby businessman shot him a suspicious glance. Their eyes met. He could definitely see Sakuta. But it didn't seem like he could see Mai Sakurajima. She remained invisible.

"Uh, Mai?"

"Not enough for you?"

"Sorry. You've defeated me. Please let go before it becomes difficult for me to walk."

"That's what you get for winding me up."

Mai seemed to be having fun teasing him and wasn't letting go. She was building up immunities to this sort of interaction.

But having her on his arm was hardly a punishment. It was great. Nothing but rewarding.

"You know, I just remembered—aren't we supposed to be fighting?"

"Oh, right."

Her smile faded, and she pulled away from him, looking disappointed. He was surprised by how quickly her demeanor changed. He genuinely couldn't tell if it was real or if she was just acting.

Part of him regretted this choice, but he still managed to enjoy the rest of their shopping trip.

The approach to the checkout was somewhat nerve-racking, but everything in the cart got rung up without any problems. He paid like always and was handed bags stuffed with veggies, meat, and snacks.

Then they left the store. Sakuta carried both bags.

He and Mai walked side by side. Sakuta had no idea where they were headed.

"Where *do* you live, Mai?"

If she was shopping near Fujisawa Station, she must live within walking distance of it.

"Earth," she said.

So he just matched pace with her, letting her lead. For the moment, they were headed in the same direction as his apartment.

"Can't wait to see your place, Mai."

"You're not coming in," she snapped. She clearly meant it.

"Aww."

"Don't act like a spoiled child. We're fighting, remember?"

"Only because you can't admit the truth."

"Oh? This is *my* fault?"

"If you want to act, you should."

"Don't bring that up again," she said. Her tone was quiet but definitely threatening. This was stronger than a simple rejection. She

was coldly pushing him away.

"Because I know nothing about you?"

"Yes. So mind your own business."

"Too bad! I actually *do* know why you quit."

"Sure you do," she sneered.

"In your third year of junior high, you put out a certain photo album."

"?!"

Mai looked distinctly rattled by this.

"You'd said you'd never do a swimsuit shoot, but your mother signed the contract anyway because she knew it would boost sales."

She'd posed for a lot of magazine pinups but never in a swimsuit. And she'd been in high demand anyway. In fact, the lack of skin had set her apart. Her natural beauty had been more than enough.

"But you had a huge fight with your mom over that and figured the best way to get back at her was to leave the business."

"....."

"But I think you're being ridiculous."

"Shut up."

"That's no reason to throw away what *you* want."

"Shut up!"

"You're the one shouting! Settle down; you're annoying the neigh —" Before he could finish, her hand struck his cheek. The crack echoed through the quiet street.

"I struggled with it a lot!"

"....."

"I was still in junior high! But I got to the studio, and they sprang a swimsuit on me, adults all around. And my mom said we'd signed the contract, that no matter how much I didn't want to, it was my job, so I had to do it! I had to force myself to smile!"

If her life had been more ordinary, maybe she could have fought it. Thrown a fit, refused to do the job. But she was Mai Sakurajima. She'd been a working professional since she was six years old. And surrounded by grown-ups...

Making a scene wasn't an option. She had to read the room and make the professional choice. She was a kid, but she had to act like an adult.

"She was just using me. I was nothing but a way for her to make money."

Mai spat out the words, a dark edge to her voice.

Still, Sakuta was sure this was her true reason. She was getting back at her mother for treating her like a product.

He could only guess how that might feel. He'd never experienced anything like it. He couldn't claim to understand, but there was one

thing he was certain of.

"I'd say that's all the more reason to go back to work."

"How so?"

"Because as awful as that all must have been, the way things are now, you're *still* suffering from it."

"Huh...?"

"If you want to do something, there's no reason to force yourself not to. You should just do it. Even I know that! And I know you get it, too, Mai."

"....."

Mai stared at the ground, the flush of anger fading away.

"....."

She was silent for a good ten seconds.

"I'm sorry I slapped you," she apologized softly.

Only then did Sakuta register the throbbing pain on his cheek.

"I've got both hands full and can't even defend myself, you know?"

"That's why it wasn't a punch."

"...Thank you so, so much," he said, making his feelings clear.

"You don't sound at all grateful."

"Yeah, well, I'm the one who got slapped. Ow. Owwww."

"You're so dramatic."

"It hurts so bad! I don't think it'll feel better until my kind, beautiful senpai rubs it..."

"Serves you right."

"Uh...how so?"

Sakuta believed himself entirely blameless.

"You deliberately worded things so I'd get mad," she accused crossly.

"I did?" It was a bit late to play dumb, but he couldn't exactly come right out and admit it, either.

"You were hoping I'd get emotional and blurt something out, right?"

"Heavens no."

"You're a real crafty one."

Mai reached out and touched Sakuta's cheek. He thought she was going to rub it, but instead, she pinched him. She pinched the side she hadn't slapped, too, yanking both cheeks.

"Owww."

"That aside, Sakuta," Mai said, totally herself again. "Who told you why I quit?"

"....."

His gaze drifted upward.

"Don't you look away."

Her grip on his cheeks got tighter.

“Ow!”

“Who told you?”

Didn’t seem like silence would get him out of this. Neither would playing dumb. Mai knew better than anyone how few people had access to that information. They’d managed to keep it well under wraps.

“I know a reporter. She interviewed me back when Kaede was being bullied.”

“Who?”

“Fumika Nanjou.”

“Oh. *Her*.”

“You know her?”

“She’s been a daytime tabloid talk show assistant for a while. Our paths have crossed before.”

Those didn’t sound like fun times.

“But why do you still know her? Your sister’s thing was two years ago.”

“Oh, uh...”

“Spit it out.”

“Well, she got interested in Adolescence Syndrome. She saw my chest scars. She drops in every now and then trying to get me to work with her on that.”

When he’d asked about Mai, Fumika had nodded and said, “Some of this is guesswork, mind” and mentioned that there’d been a lot of pressure to keep it from going public.

“So you offered her something to get info on me,” Mai said pointedly.

“Nope,” denied Sakuta, trying to get his heart to stop beating so fast.

“That’s a lie. That woman seems to think she’s a *real* journalist, and *no* professional would ever give out information for free. What did you give her?”

Mai definitely seemed to know more about the TV biz than he did. He wasn’t lying his way out of this. And she wasn’t going to let him say nothing. He was forced to confess.

“A photo. Of the scar on my chest.”

He neglected to mention they’d shared a bathroom stall to take the picture. And the fact that her perfume had been a bit of a turn on? He would carry that bit with him to his grave.

“You idiot!”

“Harsh.”

“You really are an idiot. What the hell were you thinking?”

Her voice was ragged. He could tell she was genuinely furious.

“Well, I want to help you.”

“.....”

“I really do.”

He was too scared to look her in the eye. His gaze slid sideways.

Mai sighed, letting her hands fall away. Sakuta’s cheeks were finally free, but they still stung.

“Those scars bring up painful memories for you. And it might affect your sister.”

Mai looked very serious.

“She said she’d leave Kaede out of it.”

“But if she covered that story two years ago, there’s a chance someone’ll connect it to you.”

“I suppose.”

“Right.”

Mai held out her hand. Unsure what she meant, he put the two shopping bags together and tried to hand them to her.

But she slapped them away.

“I’m asking for that woman’s number.”

“You could have just said.” He ran back through the conversation, confirming she definitely hadn’t.

“Work out that much from context.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“You don’t know how scary TV can be. If the media catch wind of something, you’ll be swarmed in an instant! I can already see the cameras staking out your house.”

Sakuta could see them, too. He’d seen people caught up in a scandal, bathed in judgmental stares, flinching against the strobe of flashes, pelted with questions...and then he imagined himself in the center of that maelstrom.

“.....”

He gulped.

“...I feel sick already,” he said, conscious of the blood draining from his face.

“And if it actually happens, you’ll feel a hundred times worse.”

Mai’s finishing blow hit hard. Sakuta was starting to suspect he’d made a fatal error. A chill ran down his spine.

“Next time, be more careful. Hear?”

Mai was annoyed, but not in an unpleasant way. She was scolding him, but with a warmth behind it. Sakuta realized this was because her anger came from genuine concern.

“Well?”

“Message received. I’ll be careful. But she already has—”

“Yes, so?” Mai held up her hand again. “You know her number, right?”

Fumika had given Sakuta her card. He took it out of his wallet and handed it to Mai.

Mai read the front, then flipped it over.

“A handwritten cell number? Sketchy.”

Sakuta felt accused.

“I do go for older women but not *that* much older.”

“Hmph.”

Still disgruntled, Mai punched the number into her smartphone.

“Mai, what’s your plan here?”

“You be quiet.”

She put the phone to her ear and turned her back to him. Fumika picked up immediately.

“Sorry for the sudden call,” Mai began. “This is Mai Sakurajima. We worked together before. I promise this isn’t a prank call. Please don’t hang up. Yes, that’s right. *The* Mai Sakurajima. I’m fine, thanks. Is this a good time?”

Mai moved things along with practiced ease.

“I’m calling to discuss Sakuta Azusagawa. We attend the same school. Yes, that’s correct.”

The calm way she handled the phone call made Mai seem like a reliable adult.

“I’d like to request you not make the photo of his chest scars public. I’d also appreciate it if you minimize the number of experts you show the photo to. Yes, obviously not for free. I’ll provide a scoop of equal value.”

“W-wait, Mai!”

What was she about to offer? Sakuta didn’t want her offering herself up for him.

Mai glared over her shoulder, placing a finger to her lips like she was shushing a child.

“Yes, I’m aware of that. I’m confident the information I’m offering will be satisfactory.”

She turned her back on him again.

“I’m about to end my hiatus. When I do, I’ll give you an exclusive interview. Yes, naturally, that alone won’t be buzzy enough. But this next part should be convincing.”

She paused a moment. What came out next sounded like she’d prepared it a long time ago.

“I won’t be returning to my mother’s office. My return will be handled by new management.”

Sakuta was probably far more shocked by this turn than Fumika Nanjou. A few weeks back and then again today...they’d just been arguing about this very thing. The more he advocated Mai should go back to work, the more adamantly she’d refused. So what exactly was

she saying? She was ending her hiatus? How could he not be surprised?

"I'm sure you can see that this topic will have a far more immediate impact than Azusagawa's. After all, most people won't even believe that story. By all means, think it over."

The next few minutes were just "Yes," "That's right," and "Agreed," as Fumika verified a few things.

"Then we have a deal? I look forward to working with you again."

Polite to the very end. Mai hung up.

She turned back to Sakuta.

"There you have it!"

"Sorry."

"Why would you apologize?"

"Thank you."

"But seeing you all downcast like this is kinda cute."

This time Sakuta didn't have a glib response. He really owed her one. The chill he'd felt when he pictured the cameras chasing him around was totally gone. He felt safe again. And that was all Mai's doing.

"But you're really going back?"

And with new management.

"You were right about that, Sakuta." Mai seemed reluctant to admit it. "I liked making movies and TV shows. It was hard work but rewarding. I never wanted to stop. And I shouldn't be lying to myself about that. Satisfied?"

"Not at all. That's barely a start!"

"Th-this is the part where you're supposed to forgive me!"

"You're the one who spent two whole weeks avoiding me."

"And now I just helped you!"

"That's that; this is this."

"Urp...fine. I shouldn't have been so hardheaded. I'm sorry. Are we good?"

She clearly hated having to admit fault but also knew it was the right thing to do.

"One more time."

"Forgive me! I regret everything."

"If you were only looking up at me through your eyelashes, it would be perfect."

"Don't push your luck."

Mai grabbed his nose.

"Augh! Don't do that!" he yelped, his voice sounding muffled.

Mai laughed out loud. "You sound ridiculous!"

Only then did Sakuta realize why she'd been waiting for him outside his apartment.

Mai had come to tell him she was going back to work.

She'd made up her own mind long before he shared what Fumika told him.

A small part of him found that frustrating, but for the most part, he felt pretty good about it.

"Man, the world keeps turning on its own."

"What did you say?"

"Just talking to myself."

They began walking again. He felt like the mood had improved a lot. If Mai's decision cured her Adolescence Syndrome, everything was perfect.

Three minutes later...

"Here we are," Mai said, stopping outside Sakuta's apartment building.

"Huh?"

"I live here," Mai elaborated, pointing at the building across the street. She'd told him before she lived close by, but he hadn't thought she meant *this* close. This was definitely the biggest shock of the day. Even more than her going back to work.

"Thanks for carrying these," she said, swiping the bags from his hands.

Sadly, it looked like she really wasn't going to invite him in.

"Oh, right, Sakuta..."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Come out with me this weekend."

He'd called her *Your Majesty* by accident, but there was an imperious ring to her voice that *really* fit.

"Once I'm back at work, I won't have much free time. I've been living here for two years, but I've never gone to Kamakura. Ridiculous, right? I should definitely go there once."

"Will it be that easy to get work?" He shot her a dubious look.

"I'm Mai Sakurajima," she said.

The amazing part was that this didn't sound like pride talking. It was just convincing. Like a simple statement of fact. He felt like Mai's schedule *would* fill up immediately.

"Oh, uh, but Sunday..."

"You have something more important than me?"

"I'm on the early shift on weekends. Mornings and the lunch rush."

"Just get someone to switch with you...is what I would like to say, but..." She'd clearly meant it at first. "It feels like you care about work more than me, which is infuriating."

"I'm off at two, so after that..."

“Argh, fine.”

She stomped on his foot, suggesting it really wasn't fine. But she claimed to accept it. He wasn't sure if she was acting childish or mature. Maybe somewhere in between—a little of both at once. That was Mai Sakurajima in a nutshell, Sakuta thought.

“Don't you smirk at me.”

“How can I not? You asked me on a date!”

“Oh—this isn't a date.”

Denied.

“Aww.”

“You want a date that bad?”

“Of course!” He nodded firmly.

“Then we can call it one.”

“Cool.” He pumped a fist.

“You're *that* pleased?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Okay. Five past two at the gates of the Enoden Fujisawa Station.”

“I'm working until two, remember?”

“I've given you five whole minutes.”

“If the restaurant's crowded, I might not be able to leave on the dot. Give me a little more slack, please.”

“Fine. Two thirty. If you're even a second late, I'm leaving.”

“Got it!”

And thus, in the most surprising fashion, Sakuta got his first ever date.

That evening, the jubilant cries of an adolescent male echoed through the Azusagawa bathroom.



First Dates Are Always Turbulent

1

It was a beautiful day. Sunday had finally arrived, and it proved to be perfect date weather.

Sakuta managed to get off work exactly at two, giving him enough time to race back home first.

A three-minute bicycle ride.

Kaede came out to greet him, and he patted her once on the head on his way to the bathroom.

He'd worked up a sweat pedaling home, so he rinsed off with a quick shower and, just to be safe, changed his underwear. Then he noticed Kaede's questioning look.

"Men must be prepared for anything," he declared. "I'm outta here, Kaede!"

"Uh, okay. Bye."

She saw him off, clutching Nasuno. It was now 2:20. He headed for Fujisawa Station on foot.

His steps felt light. He was walking normally, but in his heart, he was skipping along merrily. Like there were wings on his feet.

Roads he went down every day looked entirely new. His eyes lit upon flowers peeping through cracks in the pavement. His ears caught the sounds of sparrows on the telephone lines.

And he loved it all. The spirit of generosity resided within him.

At the peak of his cheer, he heard a little girl crying. He was maybe a three- or four-minute walk away from home.

Just ahead was the entrance to a park. The kid was standing in front of it, bawling her eyes out.

"What's wrong?" he said, going over to her.

She looked up and momentarily stopped crying. But a moment later, she wailed again. "You're not Mommy!"

"Are you lost?"

"Mommy's not here."

"So you're lost."

"Mommy's lost."

"A valid interpretation."

This girl seemed to have a bright future.

"Now, now, don't cry," he said, kneeling down and putting his hand on her head. "I'll help you find your mom."

"You will?"

"Yeah." He nodded, smiling. He was hoping this would get her to smile back, but she just looked confused. "Just come with me."

He took her hand, but before he could stand up...

"Die, pedo creep!" someone shouted behind him.

What? He tried to turn and look, but before he could see her face, a sharp pain shot through his butt.

It felt like the tip of a hard boot had landed right on his tailbone. Which was almost certainly what had actually happened...

"Aughhhh!" he roared, rolling across the pavement. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a girl roughly his age. Mid-teens. A high school girl.

A fluffy short bob. Short skirt, too. Bare legs. Unobtrusive makeup—definitely the fashion of the day.

"Now's your chance! Run for it!" she urged, looking dead serious.

The kid just blinked at her. "Huh? Why?" she asked, totally lost.

"It's obvious! Come on!"

It wasn't obvious, but she grabbed the kid's hand and tried to pull her away.

"Before this pedo creep stands up!"

"I'm not a pedo creep!" Sakuta said, struggling to his feet and clutching his ass. It hurt too much, and there was no strength in his legs. His legs were shaking, and he looked like a newborn fawn.

"But he's helping me find my mommy."

"Huh?" The new girl gaped at the kid and then at Sakuta. "You're really not a pedo creep?"

"I'm into older women."

"So you *are* a creep?!"

But her conviction was clearly shaken. Now that he looked, she was pretty cute. A bit of a baby face, big round eyes. The light makeup she wore had a nice, softening effect. He'd seen more than his share of girls at school who went a bit heavy on the cosmetics, but Sakuta thought this girl had definitely applied it well.

"I just found this kid and was trying to help her find her lost mother."

"No way. This kid's the one who's lost."

"Mommy's lost," the little girl said firmly.

With that, she pulled away from the new girl, moving to Sakuta's side. She grabbed hold of his sleeve. The tables had turned.

At this point, the new girl had to admit she'd read things wrong. She smiled awkwardly.

“Ugh, my butt hurts!”

“S-sorry. Ah-ha-ha.”

“I think you split my ass in two!”

“What? That sounds ba— Wait a second, it already was!”

“Ow, oww, owwww.”

“F-fine! All right!” the girl yelled...and then turned around, bracing her hands on a telephone pole. “Go on!”

And with that spirited cry, she thrust her miniskirt-clad butt in Sakuta’s direction.

“Go on and what?”

She clearly wanted him to kick her ass, but kicking a schoolgirl in broad daylight was so not his thing.

“Just get it over with! I’ve gotta meet a friend!”



Sakuta had someone to meet, too. A very important date. And the more time he wasted here, the closer his deadline got. And he still had to help the little girl—he was definitely going to be late at this rate. He couldn't afford to waste time on anything else.

It might be faster to just kick her in the butt and move on.

"Right, okay."

He gave her a light tap. That would be enough, surely.

"Stronger!" she yelled, glaring over her shoulder.

"Really?"

He kicked her a little stronger. There was a satisfying thwack.

"More!"

Still not enough, somehow.

"Fine, don't blame me later!"

She'd left him with no choice.

Good men had a duty to fulfill women's wishes.

Sakuta lowered his center of gravity and pulled his leg back, charging it with power. He locked onto the round target butt, took careful aim, and unleashed the hardest middle kick he could.

The impact noise was downright unsettling.

A moment later...

"O-owieeee!" she yelped. In Hakata dialect. "Unh..."

She fell to her knees, groaning. Both hands tenderly clutched her backside. The pain was so great she couldn't even speak. Her mouth flapped uselessly, like a goldfish.

"My butt split in half..." she managed at last.

"Don't worry! It already was."

"Uh, what's going on here?"

They both spun around. A man in a police uniform was staring at them, looking very confused.

"I'm afraid I can't let you enjoy deviant activities in broad daylight at a public park."

"She's the only deviant here!" Sakuta said, pointing at the high school girl.

"N-no! I'm not! There's a good reason for this!" She sounded desperate.

"You can explain that reason at the station."

He grabbed them each with one arm. There was no wriggling out of that. Cops knew how to handle people. This one might be getting on in years, but he was clearly quite strong. The safety of the neighborhood was in good hands.

"I'm on my way to something important! Please let go!"

Getting questioned would be a disaster. Even if, by some miracle, it only lasted five or ten minutes, Mai was hardly going to wait that

long. After all, she was Mai Sakurajima.

"Sure, sure. No struggling. This way. You, too, little lost girl. You mother's waiting at the station."

"She is? Yay!"

As the police officer dragged them away, Sakuta took comfort in the fact that at least the lost child problem was solved.

But even that small respite was immediately ruined when the officer muttered, "Are kids these days into pain?"

The police officer finally let them leave a good hour and a half after they reached the police station. Sakuta looked at the clock as they left and was horrified to see it pointing at four. Would someone please invent a time machine?

"Ugh, that sucked," the girl grumbled. She looked exhausted.

"That's my line, stupid."

"Who you calling stupid? You being all suspicious was the start of this whole mess!"

"And you got it all wrong, so you shoulder the bulk of the blame."

"Excuses are so not cool."

"Not excuses. Just the truth. And it's totally your fault the lecture lasted that long, Koga."

Her shoulders twitched.

"...How do you know my name?!"

"Tomoe Koga. It's a pretty cute name!"

"You know the whole thing?!"

Had she forgotten identifying herself to the policeman? He even knew her school. She was actually a student at Minegahara High, like Sakuta. A year below him. Technically, he was her senpai.

"I know everything about you."

"That's just dumb."

"You're from Fukuoka, right?"

"How in the heck?!" Her accent popped out again.

"....."

"Ack!" Tomoe Koga slapped both hands over her mouth.

"You slipped into your accent earlier, too."

"I—I did not!"

She refused to look at him. Seemed like she wanted to keep this a secret for some reason. A little late to try to hide it now, though.

"Well, point is, this is your fault, Koga."

"Tell me your name! Not fair only you know."

"Ichiro Sato."

No reason he should tell her the truth, so he went with an obvious lie, figuring anyone would know that was a fake name.

"Right, Sato. How is this *my* fault?" Tomoe insisted, accepting the

alias at face value.

Clearly, she wasn't prone to suspicion. She might be genuinely nice. Admitting this was a fake name now seemed likely to cause problems, so Sakuta decided he'd better keep quiet.

"If you don't know, I'm happy to explain. In the first thirty minutes, we managed to convince the officer it was all a misunderstanding. The rest was all because you were so obsessed with your phone that you never looked up from it and clearly weren't listening to him."

The entire last hour of the lecture had been about not fiddling with your phone when people were talking. Sakuta didn't even own a phone, so this felt extremely unjustified.

"That's true...but you don't need to spell it out like that!" she sulked.

"Have you no remorse?"

"I mean, I kept getting texts! I had no choice."

"So what? Ignore them."

"If I don't answer quick, I'll lose all my friends," Tomoe admitted, hanging her head.

"That's why you were so desperate to answer?"

"Otherwise, even I'd leave it alone while someone's yelling at me."

She puffed out her cheeks, glaring up at him.

"Ah-ha."

"What's that attitude? You're being mean, right?"

"Not at *all*."

"I know you're thinking, 'If you'd lose them that easily, they were never your friends at all.'"

Had someone told her as much before? It sounded like she was doing an imitation of someone.

"You clearly think so yourself," Sakuta said.

"Sh-shut up!"

Sakuta put a hand on her head, messing up her hair.

"Augh! Dumbass! I spent a lot of time on that!"

She brushed his hand off and hastily started fixing it.

"Good luck, young girl."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"You're doing your best to survive those dumb friendship rules, right? So no, I'm not making fun of you. I just think it's dumb."

Whether e-mail or texts, he had no idea who would want rules like that in the first place or who benefited from their creation. Maybe they'd originally been put in place to keep things cordial, and before anyone realized it, they'd become restrictive rules that made everyone suffer.

But once everyone decided to follow those rules, they were stuck with them. Not adhering meant getting expelled from the group. You could easily lose your friends. And once out of the group, there was no way back in. Sakuta knew that only too well. He knew how much Kaede had suffered because of it.

Restrictions like that were exhausting. Yet people couldn't feel safe unless they made rules, binding them, connecting them, creating a place where they belonged. Each e-mail or text sent was a way of checking on each other. "Are you okay?" "I'm okay." It was difficult for many people to give themselves affirmation, so they needed it from others. This give-and-take was shared, synchronized. That was how people made safe places for themselves.

Junior high or high school, schools were societies. They were worlds unto themselves. And everyone was desperate to fit in.

Sakuta only began to understand how these worlds ticked when he started high school and got a job where he spent more time interacting with college students and grown-up staff members. He began to grasp what schools looked like from an outside perspective. Only then did he realize everyone just wanted to belong.

"So you're making fun of me."

"You seem nice, Koga, so I'll drop it."

"Nice?"

"It takes guts to step in and save a kid from a creep. I respect that. Maybe next time just call for help instead, though? If you'd been up against a real creep, you might have been in big trouble. You are pretty cute."

"D-don't call me cute!"

Tomoe turned bright red. Did she somehow not get called that?

"Keep justice in your heart! Keep fighting the good fight!"

"Uh, sure. Thanks."

He hadn't expected her to accept it and actually say thanks. Maybe she genuinely was nice. Or blindingly pure of heart.

A phone rang. Sakuta didn't have one, so it was definitely Tomoe's.

"Oh crap! I promised I'd be there! Bye!"

Tomoe raced off. At that speed in a skirt as short as hers, Sakuta definitely got an eyeful, but yelling a warning after her would just draw attention to it, so he simply watched her go in silence.

"White, huh?" he remarked.

Once Tomoe was completely out of sight, Sakuta turned to go home.

He took maybe three steps, then stopped.

He felt like he was forgetting something important.

".....Ah!"

Mai's face had flicked across the back of his mind. Naturally, she was not exactly smiling pleasantly. Or even sulking adorably. This was definitely the face she'd made the one time he'd *really* made her mad.

"Craaap..."

Almost tripping over his own feet, Sakuta burst into a headlong sprint toward their agreed meeting place.

2

Sakuta came running into the Enoden Fujisawa Station. Same place he came every day on the way to school. He stopped in front of the ticket gates.

This was where Mai had said they should meet.

Trying to catch his breath, he looked right, then left. The entire set of gates was only six or seven yards wide. It didn't take long to do a thorough search.

"....."

Unfortunately, there was no sign of Mai.

"Y-yeah, of course..."

Mai Sakurajima would never wait an hour and a half.

"Yiiikes...I really blew it."

A wave of regret washed over him. But there was no way he could have ignored the lost little girl or any way he could have predicted the mess the schoolgirl of justice had caused. He stood by his choices.

But in this precise moment, he really regretted not owning a phone. He could at least have told her what was going on. Even if he had, she would probably have said, "So this is more important than a date with me?" and canceled their plans, so...

He would just have to figure out a way to get her to forgive him. Once she realized he wasn't coming, Mai would have been furious and either gone home or somewhere alone. It wouldn't be easy to get back on her good side.

As he slumped, dejected, he heard footsteps coming up behind him. They sounded familiar. But there was a distinct note of irritation in the rhythm.

"You had the gall to keep me waiting for ninety-eight minutes."

"....."

He turned around, unable to believe his ears. There was Mai. In street clothes.

"Why do you look like you just saw a ghost?"

"I never took you for the sort of girl who'd wait earnestly and adorably for an hour and a half! You *must* be an imposter!"

Her eyes narrowed. He was sure the temperature in the air lowered a few degrees.

“Clearly, we’re learning what *you* think of me.”

He mostly thought she was sexy. Did she know?!

“Uh, you took that as an insult?”

“How else would I take it, *dear*?”

Mai seemed to intend this last word as an insult, but it felt more like a reward. But if he told her that, she might never say it again, so Sakuta kept his mouth shut.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Nothing.”

He forced himself to look serious. He finally managed to register her outfit. A long-sleeve blouse with a cute knit hooded vest over it. Her skirt went to her knees. It flared out a bit at the hem, very mature-looking. Meanwhile, her boots came all the way up to just below the knees. The whole thing was classy and elegant, but not *too* polished—all perfectly balanced. A good fit for Mai’s grown-up vibe.

“.....”

But there was no skin anywhere. Maybe just the bit around her knees.

A sigh escaped him.

“*That* was rude!”

“Mai, are you sure about this?”

“Wh-what?” she asked, bracing herself.

“Date outfits are all about miniskirts and bare legs!”

“I *will* punch you,” Mai said, making a fist.

“*Sigh.*”

“Don’t look so disappointed!”

“I was looking forward to it, though.”

“Real ballsy when you’re this late.”

“You always wear black tights with your uniform.”

“W-well, I put a lot of thought into this...,” she muttered, eyes wavering.

“And you look absolutely adorable!”

“.....”

Mai turned her eyes toward him, demanding another helping.

“You’re super cute, Mai!”

“Much better.”

“My heart’s beating so fast, I want to take you home with me! Decorate my walls with you!”

“Okay, now you’re just being creepy. Knock it off.”

“Then let’s get going.”

He gestured toward the gates.

“Wait. We’re not done here.”

“What else is there?”

He’d been hoping to wriggle out of this, so he played dumb.

“Drop the act.”

“I would never dare to do such a thing in your presence.”

“Let’s hear your excuse. You will then sincerely beg my forgiveness.”

Mai seemed to be enjoying this. Her expression was lively.

“If it’s not good enough, I’m going home.”

Had Mai waited the full ninety-eight minutes just to torture him? That theory was starting to sound convincing.

“On the way here, I found a lost child by the park.”

“Bye.”

“I know it sounds fake, but it’s the truth!”

“There are no parks between your job and here,” she pointed out.

“I went home first.”

“Why?”

“I had time to spare and figured I’d better shower and change my underwear, just in case.”

“.....Gross.”

She seemed genuinely appalled.

“But I’ll assume it was the useless flailing of a singularly pathetic younger boy and move on.”

“Thank you.”

“But I won’t allow you within three yards of me the rest of the day.”

That could hardly be called a date. Anyone would assume Sakuta was stalking her.

“Go on, finish your lie.”

“I really did take a lost kid to the police station.”

“Was this kid a girl?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve making me wait while you spent time with another girl.”

“You’re counting four-year-olds?!”

“I am,” she said emphatically.

It seemed risky to confess the whole story. If he admitted he’d been with a cute high school girl like Tomoe Koga—she was legitimately cute—there was no telling what scorn would be heaped upon him.

“But the police station’s right over there.”

Mai pointed to the small station right outside Fujisawa Station.

“Once I got involved, I had to stick around until we found her parents. She was crying!”

“Hmm.” She gave him a look of deep suspicion. “I hate lies.”

“What a coincidence! So do I.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll make you eat Pocky through your nose.”

“Just one?”

“The whole box.”

This form of torture seemed *almost* feasible, and the vivid imagery it conjured was definitely not pleasant.

“I don’t think you should play with your food.”

“You *will* be eating it, so that won’t be a problem.”

“.....”

“.....”

Mai moved closer, studying his face. She was trying to pressure him into spilling the whole story. He could feel her breath on his cheek. She smelled good.

“You’re so stubborn.”

“.....”

Now he *really* couldn’t tell the truth. Not without getting Pocky in his nose.

“Well, fine. You’re not off the hook, but let’s get this date started.”
Should he be happy?

“Thank you,” he said, relief washing over—

“Oh! It’s the pedo guy!”

That voice sounded familiar...

He looked toward the connecting passage to the JR and Odakyu stations and saw Tomoe Koga again. There were three other girls with her, presumably the friends she’d promised to meet. They were a lovely group and seemed pretty close. Probably the most popular girls in their class.

“The Hakata woman!” Sakuta said.

Tomoe hurriedly ran over to him, clapping her hands over his mouth.

“Don’t call me that!” she hissed.

“Hakata woman?” one of her friends echoed, baffled.

“Uh, you know, the famous Fukuoka souvenir! The one where they put red bean paste in Baumkuchen. It has the picture of a woman on it, but it’s supposed to be called something different.”

“Oh, I’ve had that! It’s good!”

“Whoa, Tomoe!” Another friend grabbed her arm, pulling her away from Sakuta.

“Wh-what?”

“That’s the hospitalization guy,” the friend whispered. He could totally hear her.

“Huh? But that’s Ichiro Sato?” Tomoe said, confused.

“What? Where’d you get that name? And she’s...you know.”

All four of them glanced at Mai. Apparently, they could all see

her.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Her friends led her off through the gates. They were soon out of sight.

Watching them go, Sakuta realized he’d made a terrible mistake. He should never have responded to Tomoe’s voice at all. He should have pretended not to know her. That would have been so much better.

He glanced at Mai. Her face was terrifyingly devoid of expression.

“Sakuta.”

“You’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Her name’s Tomoe?”

“G-guess so.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not leaving.” She put her arms around his. “Let’s go buy some Pocky!”

“Would you let me off with just the skinny ones?”

“Nooooope.”

He was way past enjoying the mischief in her voice. Or savoring what he felt pressing against his arm.

“Mercy?”

“No can do, pedo.”

And so Sakuta and Mai’s first date began with a detour to the nearest convenience store.

3

There was a snap as a stick of Pocky broke.

Sakuta and Mai were on the Enoden train. They were sitting side by side on seats facing the ocean.

There was another snap. Mai was eating the Pocky she’d bought one stick at a time. The sight of her lips parting was awfully cute, and Sakuta couldn’t get enough of it. Mai wasn’t doing this consciously, but the way she gently nibbled on the tip of the Pocky before biting down was bewitching.

But he was unable to devote himself to the enjoyment of the sight. There was no telling when she might try to jam a stick up his nose, so he remained on guard.

The moment came even faster than he’d feared.

Mai held a Pocky in his direction.

“Here,” she said.

“I’m so full!”

“I’ve got to watch my weight. You eat the rest.”

“Eat them with what?”

“You may eat them normally,” she sighed, giving him a little side-eye.

“Then thanks.”

He took the box from her.

“You didn’t think I’d *really* make you eat them through your nose, did you?”

“You sure seemed to mean it.”

“That’s called *acting*.”

“But of course!”

“You could have tried eating *one* that way, though.”

“You’re a demon!”

“Your lack of repentance is making me reconsider.”

“Sorry! I’m kidding! You’re the beautiful Mai Sakurajima! Please show mercy!”

“You don’t sound at all convincing.”

Mai turned her eyes back to the window, looking bored. They were only three stops out of Fujisawa Station, not even to the ocean view yet. Almost to the part where the train ran between rows of houses.

This late in the afternoon, there were few people on the train. Plenty of empty seats. They’d scoped out the reactions of the passengers nearby, but none of them seemed to have noticed Mai—they most likely couldn’t see her.

“Hey.”

“Should I get down on my hands and knees?”

“No. Why do you insist on involving yourself with me? Fess up. Consider it your punishment.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“As big a pain as I’ve been, most people would have called it quits by now.”

“How self-aware.”

“It’s not like people around me hide it.”

Mai had never fit into her class or the school. She was treated like the air, and no one voluntarily interacted with her.

“That grumpy streak is why you can’t make friends, Mai.”

“You’re one to talk.”

He ignored her spiteful comment. He was fully aware of this. Yuuma and Rio told him the same thing all the time.

“But you’re also totally shameless, Sakuta.”

“I am?”

“You’re, like, the only one who’s not afraid to talk to me.”

“You can be kind of unnerving. That definitely keeps people away.”

Her beauty alone made it hard to strike up a conversation with her, and her celebrity status only made that worse.

“Oh, be quiet,” she said.

“Do you like school?”

“If you mean, ‘Even though I’ve got no friends there,’ it’s been like that since grade school, so it’s not like anything has changed. I’ve never thought of school as a place you ‘like.’”

That didn’t sound like she was trying to put up a front or be evasive. It sounded like her honest opinion. She had no strong opinion about not fitting in at school. The difference between her and those around her didn’t strike her as strange. She’d given up on it long ago, and Sakuta almost felt like she’d achieved a form of enlightenment about school life.

“Also, you’re avoiding the subject,” she said, giving him a sidelong glare. “I asked you a question first. You haven’t answered it at all yet!”

“What was it again?”

“Why are you so hell-bent on helping me? You even gave that reporter information that could cause trouble for you. You’ve got to have some reason why you’d go to such lengths.”

She was being even more insistent now.

“I just can’t ignore someone in trouble.”

“I’m asking seriously.”

“Oof.”

“You’re nice, but you’re not naturally nice.”

“I’m not?”

“You’re not nice to everyone. When that college couple tried to take my picture in Shichirigahama Station, you were downright mean.”

“I think anyone would do the same.”

“I’m saying you chose a particularly not nice way to go after them. You could have gently nudged instead.”

“Even though I was mad?”

“You could have if you wanted to. You were still levelheaded enough to pick exactly the right way to drive him into a corner.”

“The more you talk, the worse I sound...”

“You thought you were a good person?” Mai questioned, looking astonished.

“At the least, you’re worse than me.”

“Whatever. Just tell me the reason.”

She wasn’t letting him wriggle out of this. She never did.

“Then I’ll give you a serious answer. You’d better listen.”

“Go on.”

“I thought, here’s my chance to impress a beautiful—”

"I'm not asking you to confess the raw, unvarnished truth."

"You're the one who demanded a serious answer!"

"Just give me your current best excuse."

Anyone would assume Mai was out to find out how he really felt. Sometimes he really didn't get her.

"I know how excruciating it is when you've got no one to ask for help," he said, like he was past caring.

"....."

This time she didn't interrupt. He must have been passing.

"When Kaede got Adolescence Syndrome, nobody would believe it, even when it happened right in front of them."

Sakuta took a bite of Pocky. If he talked with his mouth full, he figured Mai would scold him for bad manners, so he swallowed before continuing.

"Nobody would listen to us. They all just pulled away. We were telling the truth, but they called us liars."

And he didn't blame them. It was the natural reaction. If it hadn't been his own sister, Sakuta would never have believed it, either. He'd have closed his eyes and ears, pretending he'd seen and heard nothing.

That would have been so much easier. Everyone knew as much.

"Can I ask one thing?" Mai inquired, sounding slightly hesitant.

He nodded. He had a feeling he knew what was coming.

"Your parents?" She treaded carefully.

She had problems with her own mother, so it must have taken a lot for her to risk asking something so intrusive. He felt like her ability to put herself in his shoes was a good thing. She might act the queen a bit, but she could also understand how the commoners felt.

"They don't live with us."

"I know that. I've been in your apartment."

Certainly, seeing his place would make that very clear. There was no hint of anything grown-up. Only Sakuta's shoes were at the door, and the vibe in the hall and his bedroom was the same. Normally, people's territories felt different, even if they were family.

"I'm asking if..."

"I know."

He'd known what she meant from the beginning. How had they handled Kaede's situation?

He ate three Pocky at once. The box was empty now. He crumpled it up and shoved it in his pocket.

"Mom, well... She tried to accept it. In the end, the whole situation was too much for her, and she went... She's still in the hospital. Her daughter being bullied was hard enough without this insane Adolescence Syndrome stuff on top of it. Dad's at her side."

Sakuta himself still didn't know how to handle it. Before he did anything, everything around him had changed, and before he knew it, things were the way they were now.

Only the results remained.

He hadn't been able to do a thing, and there was nothing he could do now.

"Kaede took Mom's rejection hard, and since she was the cause of it, that was even worse...and now she won't let anyone come close but me."

"How old is she again?"

"Two years younger than me. She should be a third-year in junior high. Ever since it all went down, she became an extreme homebody and hasn't been to school at all."

Strictly speaking, she *couldn't* leave the house. If she put shoes on and stood at the door, her legs refused to take a single step outside. She'd start crying like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

A counselor came to see her once a month, but so far, there were no signs of improvement.

"Your mother... Do you hate her for it?"

"I used to," Sakuta admitted. "I thought it was her job to help us, to believe Kaede and me."

But living away from her had opened his eyes to a few things. How much work she'd done around the house on a daily basis. Cooking meals, doing laundry, cleaning the bath and toilet, taking care of all sorts of problems. And when they'd all lived together, Sakuta had taken that for granted.

Once he had to do it all himself, there were things he noticed, things he changed. Specifically, he now sat down to pee.

He knew for a fact his mother had been putting up with a *lot*. There would certainly have been things she wished the rest of the family were more conscious of. But she never once uttered a single word of complaint in front of Sakuta. It never once showed on her face. She never once demanded anyone thank her for it.

And he started to feel that he had no right to bear a grudge against her, given all he had to be grateful for. Over the last year, those feelings had only grown.

The same went for his father. They met once a month to report progress on each side. His father was looking after his wife while also providing enough money for Sakuta and Kaede to live on their own. No matter how many shifts Sakuta took at the restaurant, he'd never earn enough to pay the rent at their current apartment. Sakuta had to admit he was simply not able to sustain his current daily life with nothing but his own power.

"Dealing with Kaede taught me that I'm just a kid, and being a

grown-up doesn't mean you can solve everything. Pretty obvious, I know."

"Wow...that's quite astute."

"You totally think I'm an idiot."

"Not really. Most of our classmates still haven't figured that out yet."

"They just haven't had the chance. Everyone will once they're forced to face the facts."

"So where are we going with this?" Mai asked, glancing toward the windows. The ocean would be coming into view soon.

He remembered her original question.

Why did he insist on involving himself?

That's how this conversation started.

"There was one person who listened to me about Kaede's Adolescence Syndrome."

If it hadn't been for that, Sakuta was sure he'd never have made it through.

He'd learned some harsh lessons.

Being lonely wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Being genuinely alone was far, far worse.

This was a truth everyone knew, deep down. And the deep-rooted fear of that led to rules like "answer texts immediately" or "never leave a message unread." Without realizing how those rules became nooses tied around people's necks, it simply led to getting permanently ostracized.

"I found someone who believed me."

It hurt to remember her. He found himself biting his lip each time he recalled her name.

"A girl?" Mai inquired.

"Huh?" Sakuta jumped. She was right.

Mai's cold stare was downright unnerving.

"I could see it in your face," she said. Clearly displeased.

The train stopped at Kamakura High School Station. The next stop was Shichirigahama, where they usually got off.

The moment the doors opened, Mai stood up.

"Come on," she ordered.

The goal of their date was the last stop on the line. They still had a fifteen-minute ride ahead of them.

"Not Kamakura proper?" he asked.

Mai was already off the train.

"Uh, wait." He scrambled after.

The doors closed a second later, and the train slowly rattled off. They watched until it was out of sight, then Mai turned her gaze toward the shore.

This station was built right on the waterfront. Technically, on a hill above it. There was nothing obstructing the view. You could just stand on the platform waiting for a train and have the view all to yourself.

It was the kind of location used in movies all the time. Sakuta was pretty sure something actually had filmed things here—he'd definitely seen film crews on the beach.

"Since you were ninety-eight minutes late, it's already evening," Mai explained.

The sun was hanging low over Enoshima, and the sky was turning red.

"Let's walk."

She pointed toward the water and left the station without waiting for an answer.

Sakuta laughed about that but followed her happily.

Outside the station, Sakuta and Mai had to wait an eternity for a walk light to cross Route 134. On the other side was a twenty-step staircase down to the Shichirigahama beach.

Keeping Enoshima at their backs, they walked in the direction of Kamakura.

The sand pulled at their feet, making it hard to walk.

"Did you know that, despite its name, Shichirigahama isn't even close to being seven *ri* long?"

"One *ri* is about two and a half miles, but this beach isn't even two."

This was a far cry from the usual exaggeration.

"How dull," Mai said. Maybe she'd wanted to be the one to tell him.

"Kujuukuri Beach in Chiba also isn't ninety-nine *ri*."

"You know a lot of useless facts," she remarked, looking very bored.

"You raised the subject!"

"So what was she like?"

"Hmm?" He pretended not to follow.

"The crazy lady who believed your nonsense."

"You're jealous?"

"What's her name?"

"You *are* jealous."

"Just spit it out!"

Teasing her further was clearly just going to make her mad.

"Her name was Shouko Makinohara," Sakuta said, listening to the sound of the surf. "She's five foot three. Smaller than you across the board. I dunno how much she weighs."

“If you did, I’d want to know why.”

“She heard me out, listening carefully, but never changed the way she acted or seemed to take pity on me.”

“Hmm.”

Mai had asked, but now she didn’t seem to care.

“Only other distinguishing feature was her Minegahara High uniform.”

“.....”

Only then did she look at him.

“Did you enroll here to chase after her?”

“With everything that happened with Kaede, staying where we were was too hard—that was the deciding factor. We talked about going someplace even farther, but info spreads online no matter where you go, so we figured distance wouldn’t really matter. But, well...the reason I picked this school was basically what you said.”

He might as well admit it. After everything else he’d divulged, there was no point hiding it.

“But she rejected you,” Mai said, seemingly enjoying his misfortune.

“The outcome’s the same, but...I never actually asked her out.”

“Even though you chose her school?”

There was an accusatory look in her eyes, as if she were saying, “What was the point of coming to Minegahara High, then?”

“She wasn’t here.”

He picked a rock off the beach and threw it at the ocean. He felt like this was the same spot where he’d gotten rid of his phone.

“She graduated?”

“I was in third year of junior high when we met. She said she was in second year of high school, so I doubt that’s it.”

“Then she transferred?”

“That would have been preferable.”

“Then it was something else?”

“I went around to all the third-year classes, asking all the students.”

“And?”

Sakuta shook his head.

“Nobody’d ever heard of a student named Shouko Makinohara.”

“.....”

Mai appeared unsure how to take that.

“I checked the class lists for the entire school, wondered if she’d been held back a year...even went through the last three yearbooks.”

But he’d found no sign of her.

There were no records of any Shouko Makinohara ever attending Minegahara High.

“I don’t know what it means, either. All I know is that I met someone named Shouko Makinohara, and she was there for me when I needed her.”

“Yeah.”

“And since I can’t pay her back for that...maybe I’m trying to help you instead.”

On your own, the anxiety would never go away. Just having someone there with you could be enough to get you through it. That had been Sakuta’s experience two years ago.

“Also, I’m just curious.”

“About what?”

“Why does Adolescence Syndrome happen? If I could crack that...”

His hand drifted to his chest.

“The scars bother you?”

“A bit, yeah.”

Summer was coming, and swimming class was going to suck. If there was a way to get rid of his scars, he’d love to know how.

“And if we can crack it, maybe I can help Kaede.”

“Right.”

It would be a tragedy if she could never leave the house again. A real waste to spend the rest of her life reading and playing with their cat.

Sakuta wanted to bring Kaede to this beach someday. But to do that, he had to learn more about Adolescence Syndrome and find a way to apply that knowledge to her case. That was the real reason he’d first gotten interested in Mai...

He didn’t need to spell it out. One glance at the smile on her face made it clear she understood.

Sakuta picked up another rock and flung it at the water. It traced an arc through the air and sank with a plop.

“Hey.”

“.....”

He waited silently for her next question.

“Are you still in love with her?”

“.....”

He couldn’t confirm or deny. All he could do was cover it over with a smile.

“Are you in love with Shouko Makinohara?” Mai asked.

Once again, he turned it over in his mind.

Did he still love her?

Maybe he’d been avoiding that question all along.

Did he love Shouko Makinohara?

Once, the very thought of her had sent stabbing pains through his

chest. If he dwelled on thoughts of her, the tightness inside would get so bad he couldn't sleep.

But a year had gone by. It wasn't like that now. Not anymore.

Maybe he'd found his answer a long time back and had just been avoiding putting his feelings in words. Maybe this was the time to say it.

"I really did love her."

He let the words drift toward the ocean. That alone felt like a huge weight off his chest.

Without there ever being a specific trigger for it, time had turned his feelings into memories. But a scab had formed on the wound of his broken heart, and before he knew it, that had peeled away, too. That was simply how human beings moved on with their lives.

"If you're going to say it, might as well say it louder."

"I feel like you'd never let me hear the end of it."

"I could film it for you," Mai offered, holding up her phone. "Come on! Say it again!"

He thought he heard a definite edge to her tone.

"Are you, like, actually mad?"

"Huh? Why would I be?"

She was definitely fuming. Her irritation was obvious. There was a sharpness to her glare, and Sakuta could feel it stabbing into him.

"That's why I'm asking..."

"Who would be happy having her date interrupted by an admission of love for some other girl?"

"I used the past tense! Important detail!"

"Hmph."

Mai really did not seem convinced. This might take a while to get past. But while Sakuta was considering his approach...

"The sea!" a cheery voice called.

They looked up and saw a couple standing on the stairs to the beach.

The man had curly hair and a big pair of headphones around his neck.

The woman was smaller, with glasses. When her boyfriend ran off excitedly toward the water, she looked after him, sulking. Her heels were sinking into the sand, and she wasn't making much progress.

They looked a few years older than Mai and Sakuta. Probably college students.

Seeing her struggle, her boyfriend ran back toward her.

"N-no, don't!" she yelped.

But he swept her off her feet, carrying her in his arms to the water's edge.

"I can't believe you!" she complained. He put her down. Her face

was red. She was clearly conscious of Sakuta's gaze. "The nerve!"

While she grumbled, he was standing in the surf, yelling, "Whoa! The waves!" Not listening to her at all. Kind of an odd couple.

"It's cold! I'm leaving," the woman said, turning around. But he just threw his arms around her from behind.

Sakuta let out an impressed "Wow."

Fortunately, they were too busy flirting to hear him.

"You're so warm!"

"....."

She seemed to be cursing under her breath. Still, she didn't try to shake him off. The way she buried her face in his arms was kinda cute.

Sakuta glanced at Mai.

"I'm not cold," she said, sticking a nail in that plan.

"Wow, I'm sooo cold," he tried, staring at the water. She just glared at him.

The college couple was walking away along the surf, hand in hand.

Like something out of a movie.

"Looks nice," he said.

"Yeah."

"Mm?"

"N-never mind."

Had the truth slipped out? Mai seemed to be hastily covering her tracks.

"I could hold your hand."

"Why does it sound like you're doing me the favor?" she asked.

But when he held his hand out, she took it. Not so they could hold hands, though.

When Mai pulled her hand away, her phone was left on his palm. A smartphone with a red bunny-ear cover.

"Is this for me?"

"No."

"Then..."

But then his eyes caught what was on-screen.

She'd left it open to an e-mail.

He glanced up to see if he could read it, and she nodded, looking tense.

Come to Shichirigahama Beach at 5 PM on May 25 (Sunday).

Today's date. Five minutes from now.

He wasn't sure why Mai had shown him this.

Until he saw to whom it was addressed.

Her manager.

Mai had written this e-mail to her mother. And the screen showed

she'd already sent it. Sent it the day they'd agreed to this date. The day Mai had announced she was going back to work. Right after they'd parted ways.

It was almost five.

"You're really meeting her?" he asked, handing the phone back.

"I don't want to."

"Then you don't have to."

He knew she'd had no contact with her mother since they'd argued about the photo book she had put out in her third year of junior high. She'd already made up her mind to find new management, so there didn't seem to be any need to meet her mother in person now.

"Oh, is there some agency contract in the way?"

"I ended the contract with her office when I went on hiatus. Don't worry."

That meant this had to be for personal reasons. It was a way to settle things.

Mai stared into the surf, looking unhappy. She'd made up her mind but was obviously still reluctant to do this.

"I'm a big believer in not doing anything you don't want to," Sakuta said, like he was thinking out loud.

"Is there a part two?"

"It kinda goes hand in hand with 'If you have to do something, then go out and get it done.'"

Sakuta stretched his arms out toward the water.

Some things were best avoided.

Some things couldn't be.

Everything was one of the two.

If something could be avoided, there was no need to do it. But when something couldn't be avoided, no progress could be made by ignoring it.

And in this case, Mai seemed to think talking to her mother was the latter.

"Are you okay?" Sakuta asked, deciding it was best to be direct.

"I chose this myself, and...she's already here."

A distant figure was approaching from the Enoshima end of the beach.

"She's always been punctual."

She was still so far off, Sakuta could never have identified her. But Mai was sure—they were family, after all.

"Go away," Mai insisted, waving a hand like she was shooing a stray dog.

"I was gonna introduce myself!"

"....."

Sakuta threw his hands up, surrendering before her glare.

“We’ll continue the date once this is over. Keep your distance until then.”

“Got it.”

He moved away from the surf and sat down on a piece of driftwood.

The figure in the distance drew closer. Sakuta could see her clearly now.

Like Mai, she was a spirited beauty. Technically, it was Mai who took after her...

Slim, tall, still seemed pretty young—at the least, not old enough to have a daughter Mai’s age. Seeing her reminded Sakuta that he’d overheard a classmate gossiping, saying she’d only been twenty when she had Mai.

If that was true, she was still in her thirties. That still seemed old to Sakuta, but nothing about her seemed like a mom. The light-colored suit only reinforced that impression.

Mai stood still, watching her mother approach. They were maybe ten paces apart now.

Sakuta saw Mai say something. A greeting of some kind. It was drowned out by the wind and the surf. From this distance, he couldn’t make out a word.

Mai’s mother slowed a little but didn’t stop. She didn’t respond to Mai’s words.

Mai spoke again, leaning forward, looking desperate.

“.....”

That’s when Sakuta realized something was wrong.

The mother’s gaze was all over the place. Looking left and right, like she was searching for the person she was here to meet.

Mai was standing right there, but she never looked directly at her.

“.....Oh shit,” he said, a sinking feeling in his chest. *Please, not this*, he screamed inside.

And then Mai’s mother walked straight past her.

Like she couldn’t see Mai at all.

Like she couldn’t hear her daughter’s voice.

She just walked on by.

Sakuta knew what was happening already. A chill ran down his spine.

He watched in horror, fear washing over him.

Mai moved back in front of her mother, waving her arms, begging, “Can’t you see me?”

Loud enough for Sakuta to hear.

But Mai’s mother walked right past her again. Behind her, Mai’s arms fell limply to her sides.

Sakuta found himself on his feet, headed right toward Mai—and her mother.

When he was about ten yards out, she saw him.

When he was five yards out, she seemed sure.

“Was it you?” she asked. She seemed cross. This reminded him of Mai and caught him off guard. “Why’d you call me to a place like this? Who are you? You look like you’re in high school, but I don’t believe we’ve met.”

The questions just kept coming.

“I’m Sakuta Azusagawa. Yeah, I’m in high school. That one.” He waved in the direction of Minegahara High, up Route 134.

“Well, what do you want with me, Sakuta Azusagawa? I’m a very busy woman.”

“I’m not the one who wants something.”

He caught Mai’s eye over her mother’s shoulder.

She hesitated for a moment but then nodded slowly. He felt like she’d known this might happen and brought Sakuta with her to prepare for the worst. Using the “date” as bait.

“Then who does?”

Weird question, he thought.

“Mai. You know that already, right?”

She was only here because she’d read the e-mail. That fact shouldn’t have changed even if she couldn’t see Mai.

“.....”

Mai’s mother looked him over, as if evaluating him.

“*Who* called me here? Say that again.”

“Mai.”

“Right.”

“Yes.”

The wind caught her hair, and she brushed it back.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

“?!” Mai’s eyes went wide. Shock and horror fought for dominance behind them. What kind of mother talked like that?

“She’s your daughter!” Sakuta yelled, letting his emotions get the better of him.

They might not be talking, but this was no way for a mother to behave.

“I don’t *have* a daughter. You think this is funny?”

“Do *you*?!”

The more worked up Sakuta got, the colder she became.

“What’s this really about? You want me to manage you or something?”

“Of course not! What are you...?”

His eyes met hers, and the words died on his lips. There was a

look of pity in them. And at last, he realized that she'd said "Who's that?" because she genuinely had no idea who Mai Sakurajima was.

This woman's eyes proved she wasn't lying.

"Right, the e-mail! You got an e-mail from Mai saying she'd meet you here?"

"If I show it to you, will that bring an end to this farce?"

She pulled a phone from her purse, holding it out for him to see.

"...Why?" Mai wondered. Leaning in to look.

Naturally, her mother couldn't hear or see her.

The body of the e-mail was the same as what Mai had shown him a few minutes before.

Come to Shichirigahama Beach at 5 PM on May 25 (Sunday).

And the sender field said **Mai**. Nothing strange about it.

But her mother was saying, "Sender unknown. But I added it to my calendar, and I remember clearing my schedule to be here. Can't imagine why."

He was every bit as confused. It clearly said **Mai**, but it sounded like her mother couldn't even see the name.

From what she'd just said, it seemed clear that when she'd received the e-mail three days earlier, she had been well aware it was from her daughter. That's why she'd cleared her schedule and taken the time to come here.

But before the day in question, she had completely forgotten Mai. It wasn't a matter of just not seeing or hearing her—she didn't even remember her daughter at all.

This was hard to believe, but it was the only explanation for her behavior.

"Is that even possible?!" His mouth was running of its own accord. There was a hollow rasp in his voice that sounded horrifying even to his ears. "I can't just accept that!" He hurled his shock at Mai's mother.

"Certainly an interesting way to sell yourself, but a bit too crazy for me. Learn a thing or two about the world before you try again."

And with that, she turned on her heel and walked back the way she came.

"You're her mother!"

"....."

She didn't look back. Her stride didn't break even once.

"How can you forget your own daughter?"

"...That's enough," Mai said softly.

"But she...!"

"Enough."

"We're not done here!" Sakuta roared, unable to stop himself.

".....Please. No more," Mai pleaded, sounding like she was about

to cry.

A shudder ran through him. It dawned on Sakuta that he was just making this even worse for her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“.....”

“Really sorry.”

“.....No, it’s fine.”

“.....”

What on earth was happening to Mai?

All along, Sakuta had thought it was a matter of being unseen and unheard. He’d assumed as much. Mai probably had, too.

But now it seemed like they’d been very wrong.

Neither of them had grasped the full scope.

Not only had her mother not seen her or heard her voice...she’d completely forgotten that Mai ever existed.

“.....”

The more he thought about that, the worse it seemed.

“Sakuta,” Mai said, eyes wavering anxiously.

He knew she was worried about the same thing.

Her mother might not be the only one. Everyone else may have forgotten her, too.

When had this started? Maybe the moment they stopped seeing her. Maybe not.

If she was really disappearing from people’s memories...

Alas, it would not take them long to confirm that was exactly what was happening.

4

Sakuta and Mai walked the rest of the beach to the station they used for school. Neither had suggested it aloud; their feet just naturally carried them toward their usual route home.

Along the way, Sakuta spoke to middle-aged tourists and local children and grandparents, asking them about Mai Sakurajima. It was the same question a dozen times, which was met by the same answer every time.

“Never heard of her.”

Not one person knew who she was. Not one of them could see her.

Part of Sakuta was still hoping against hope. He wanted to believe they’d just coincidentally spoken to a string of people who didn’t know her. But that faint hope soon faded.

When they got to Fujisawa Station, Sakuta used a pay phone to call the reporter Fumika Nanjou. He was glad he'd kept her business card in his pocket.

"Yes?" she answered, her tone professional.

"This is Sakuta Azusagawa."

"Oh!" Her tone brightened immediately. "A love call from you? Today is special."

"No love here."

"No interest in a risky relationship with an older woman? I do so love playing with fire."

"You're a bit too old for me."

"So what do you want?"

She was good at ignoring anything not in her favor.

"It's about Mai Sakurajima."

"Where'd that come from?"

Oh, Sakuta thought.

That sounded promising.

But her next words instantly shattered that hope.

"And who might that be?"

"....."

"Hello?"

"You've never heard of Mai Sakurajima?" One more try.

"Never! Who is she?"

"Then...uh, the photo...?"

A photo of the scars on his chest had been part of their deal. Fumika still had it. And she'd promised Mai she wouldn't make it public in return for exclusive rights to the story about Mai's return to work.

"I promised not to use it, right? I remember. I'll keep my word."

"Who did you promise?"

"You, obviously. What's going on? Are you okay?"

She sounded half-worried, half-curious. Sakuta decided it was better not to talk further. Didn't want her getting wind of anything.

"I'm fine. Sorry. I just started fretting about the photo... Guess I wasn't making sense."

"Trust meee!"

"Sorry if I interrupted anything. Thanks."

Sakuta hung up while he still sounded calm.

After replacing the receiver in its cradle, he continued holding on to the phone for a long time.

Then, he slowly turned around, met Mai's eye, and shook his head.

She seemed like she hadn't entertained any hope to the contrary. She just nodded. No emotion on her face.

“Thanks for today,” she said, turning to leave.

No hesitation. No indecision. She just walked off in the direction of home.

The same confident gait as usual.

Sakuta looked after her, his heart aching.

A wave of panic hit him. He was afraid he’d never see her again.

His body moved on its own.

“Mai, wait.”

He ran after her and grabbed her wrist.

She stopped but didn’t turn around. She just stared at the ground in front of her.

“Let’s go.”

“.....” Her head lifted slightly. “Go where?”

“Maybe there’s still someone out there who remembers you.”

“You sound like everyone but you has forgotten me,” Mai said with a forced laugh.

“.....”

He didn’t deny it. He couldn’t. That was the only explanation. And Mai was thinking the same thing. Otherwise, she never would’ve said that.

But he wanted to believe. Believe that if they went far enough, everyone would know her, see her, point and say, “Isn’t that Mai Sakurajima?” He wanted to believe there was still a chance.

“Let’s make sure.”

“What’s the point? What if we find out you *are* the only one who remembers me? What good would that do?”

“Then at the very least, I’ll be with you till we do.”

“?!”

There was no way she wasn’t scared. That was impossible. The fear had to be crushing her. She barely understood what was happening to her, and she definitely had no idea why it was happening. There was no telling what tomorrow would bring, so going home alone, with no one waiting for her there—that would’ve been nothing short of terrifying.

He saw her shoulders shaking. That was proof enough.

“...How conceited of you,” she said.

“And it is a date.”

“I’ve got a whole year on you, you know.”

“Sorry.”

“My hand hurts. Let go.”

He realized he was squeezing pretty hard. He released her wrist.

“Sorry.”

“*Sorry* won’t cut it.”

“Sorry.”

And with that, both of them fell silent.

A full minute passed without another word.

“...Fine,” Mai finally whispered.

“Mm?”

“If you don’t want to let me go home yet, then I’ll allow you to continue this date.”

Mai looked up, and with an impish grin, she pinched Sakuta’s nose.

At some point, she had stopped trembling.



our memories

1

They took the outbound Tokaido Line from Fujisawa Station, riding it about an hour west—roughly thirty-one miles. Silver cars with two stripes around them—one green, one orange—carried them through Kanagawa Prefecture to Shizuoka Prefecture’s Atami, a city famous for its hot springs.

It was now seven PM.

They needed to know.

What was happening to Mai?

Who could see her? Who still remembered her?

At first, they had believed these Adolescence Syndrome symptoms were centered strictly on Mai herself. The question now was the scale of this phenomenon making Mai suffer. How far did it reach?

On the way here, they’d gotten off the train at Chigasaki and Odawara Stations, but nobody had been able to see Mai.

Sakuta had asked a few people about her. “Huh?” “Who?” “Never heard of her.” “I don’t know the new kids.” No positive responses. When they reached Atami Station, he tried again but with no change.

It seemed everyone really had forgotten Mai Sakurajima. It was like they’d *never* known about her.

Mai watched them all without emotion. There wasn’t a single hint of surprise, grief, or fear in her calm that seemed like the undisturbed surface of a placid lake.

On the platform in Atami Station, Sakuta stared up at the electronic sign displaying the train schedule.

They had to change trains to go any farther, even though it was still the Tokaido Line. The train they’d taken here made its last stop at Atami.

He knew there was one bound for Shimada arriving at 7:11. He had no idea where that was or even what prefecture it was in. But from the map of the line, he knew it was farther west than Shizuoka. That was enough.

Six minutes until the train left. They had a little time.

"I'm gonna call my sister," Sakuta said.

He ran over to the pay phone by the station shop. He inserted a coin and lifted the receiver. After punching in a number, he listened to it ring.

After a minute, it went to the answering machine.

"Kaede, it's me."

Kaede never answered calls from anyone but Sakuta, so he always had to talk through the answering machine first.

"Hello! This is Kaede."

"Good, you're still up."

"It's only seven!" Even without seeing her, he could tell she'd puffed out her cheeks. "What's up?"

"Sorry. I'm not gonna make it home tonight."

"Huh?"

"Had to go pretty far out for something."

"Wh-what sort of *thing*?"

"Well..." He hesitated but decided he should ask her. "Kaede, you remember the girl who came over the other day? Mai Sakurajima?"

"First I've heard of it."

She shot him down like it was nothing.

"....."

The next words wouldn't come. He bit his lip, waiting for the roiling inside him to subside.

"Tell me, who is that?" Kaede asked, sounding jealous.

Sakuta barely heard her. Having someone he knew force him to face the truth was especially painful. Fumika Nanjou had been bad, too. This was far worse than having strangers say they'd never heard of Mai.

Memories they'd shared were really vanishing. That made it personal. It became far more real to him.

"Well, if you don't remember, that's fine," he managed. "You'll have to make do with the instant ramen in the kitchen cabinet for dinner. Eat any flavor you like. Make sure you feed Nasuno. And don't forget to brush your teeth before bed. I'll call again. Good night."

"Uh, what? Wait—!"

The ten-yen coin he'd put in the phone ran out halfway through her yelp, and they were disconnected.

Plus, it was almost time for the train to arrive.

"Let's go, Mai."

"Yes, let's."

Sakuta and Mai boarded the train resting on platform two, bound for Shimada.

The train left Atami, skirting the Pacific coast as it headed farther west. They changed again at Shimada Station and Toyohashi Station, leaving Shizuoka for Aichi Prefecture. They traveled hundreds of miles, heading toward Gifu Prefecture.

As they went, Sakuta asked people from these places he'd never been to before about Mai, but he didn't find a single person who knew Mai Sakurajima or even one who'd ever seen her.

Now they were rattling along on a train bound for Ogaki.

That was probably as far as they could investigate today. It would be after midnight by the time they arrived. Each stop left fewer passengers onboard.

The wheels emitted a grinding sound as they traveled along the rails. There was a gentle rattling that came from the vibrating joints. As the noise of the crowds thinned, the ambient sounds turned into lullabies.

A box seat meant for four emptied out, and Sakuta and Mai sat together on one side of it.

"Second-highest population in Gifu Prefecture, after Gifu City," Mai suddenly said, staring at her phone's screen.

"What is?"

There were barely any other passengers left in their car. Maybe three, seated some distance away. It felt like he and Mai were alone.

"Ogaki."

"Oh."

He could easily hear her, even when she spoke softly.

"It says they also have lots of groundwater."

"Well, I'm always up for good water."

"....."

"....."

When they fell silent, the sounds of the train filled the gap. It was too dark outside to enjoy any kind of view, but Mai still leaned her elbow on the little table beneath the window frame, staring at the strange lands passing beyond.

A good ten minutes went by without either saying a word.

"Hey, Sakuta..."

"What is it?"

"Can you see me?"

Her eyes, reflected in the windowpane, caught Sakuta's profile.

"I can see you."

"And hear me?"

"I can."

“Do you remember me?”

“You’re Mai Sakurajima. A third-year student at Kanagawa’s own Minegahara High. A famous child actress who went on to do a whole lot more.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“As a result of her childhood celebrity, she’s become rather twisted and incapable of sharing her true feelings.”

“Who? Me?”

“You’re scared, but you’re trying to hide it.”

With that, Sakuta reached out and took her hand.

Mai raised her eyebrows, surprised. Her gaze dropped to their hands.

“I didn’t say you could hold my hand.”

“But I want to.”

“.....”

“I feel like I deserve a little reward here.”

“...Then go ahead.”

Mai turned her gaze back to the window, but her fingers slid between his.

Like boyfriend and girlfriend.

A little bit embarrassing. A little bit thrilling.

“Don’t get used to it,” Mai said.

He was pretty sure she was blushing. But she was also getting a kick out of the look on his face.

Eventually, the announcer informed them the next stop was Ogaki. End of the line.

They held hands until the train stopped.

When they stepped onto the platform in Ogaki Station, it was 12:40 AM—a new day.

He asked an attendant about Mai, received a “Never heard of her,” and then they exited through the gates.

They picked the south exit at random, walked as far as the bus terminal, and stopped there. Sakuta had been worried it would be the sort of station with nothing around, but this seemed like it was in the heart of the city. There were buildings and businesses all over. It wouldn’t be too hard to find a place to stay.

Only question was where to spend the night. Alone, Sakuta would have used a manga café in lieu of a hotel, but he didn’t want to take Mai there. More importantly, that option went right out the window when Mai said “I really need a bath” as they stepped off the train.

Sakuta felt the same.

They’d spent a lot of time in the salt breeze on Shichirigahama, and he could definitely use a shower. His clothes felt sticky, and he

was pretty sure they both smelled like salt.

He considered a few options but decided the safest bet was the business hotel across from the station.

He asked if they had rooms, and the man at the desk gave him a deeply suspicious glare. A totally normal reaction when a high school boy with no luggage wanted to rent a room in the middle of the night.

But he got through the check-in process just fine. He paid for the night in advance to avoid further suspicion.

Since the clerk couldn't see Mai, there was no need to check her in. Sakuta turned to make sure she was fine with sharing a room, but she was already headed to the elevators.

The elevator was waiting for them, so they stepped inside and rode it to the sixth floor.

Their room was at the end of the hall. Room 601.

When Sakuta got stuck trying to figure out how to use a card key, Mai reached out and opened the door for him.

"You push it all the way in, then pull it out."

Sakuta tried it himself. It just didn't feel right. He didn't get the sense that he had opened anything. But like Mai said, the door undeniably cracked open.

It was a single room. One bed. A dinky little table with a mirror. And a chair in front of that. There was also a nineteen-inch TV, a tiny refrigerator, and a pot.

This was the definition of cramped. The bed took up maybe 70 percent of the space.

When he said as much, Mai scoffed, saying, "This is typical."

She sat down on the bed, used the remote to turn the TV on, then peeled off her boots. Legs swinging, she flipped through all the channels before turning it off.

Mai let herself fall backward onto the bed. She must have been exhausted. They'd spent the whole day sitting, but that had been more than enough to wear Sakuta out. His whole body felt weary.

"I'm gonna take a bath," Mai announced, sitting up.

"Go right ahead."

"No peeping."

"Don't worry. I get three meals worth on the sounds of the shower alone."

"....."

Mai pointed silently at the door. A clear sign for him to leave.

"Allowing a younger boy to hear the sounds of your shower and writhe in agony is a pleasure reserved for the confident older woman."

"F-fine! I knew that. Obviously." Mai snorted like she'd always intended as much. "Just don't do anything weird out here."

"Weird how?"

He knew what she meant, of course.

“By weird, I mean weird! Don’t make me spell it out!”

She turned her back and headed into the bathroom. The door slammed behind her. He heard a loud click as she turned the lock.

“That was *really* cute.”

Eventually, he heard the shower start.

Listening to it with half an ear, Sakuta examined the room’s phone. It seemed like it could handle outbound calls.

He picked up the receiver and dialed his friend’s cell—the one number he had memorized.

Halfway through the third ring, a familiar voice came on the line.

“You know what time it is?” Yuuma asked, sounding sleepy.

“One sixteen AM.”

There was a clock built into the bed.

“I know!”

“Were you asleep?”

“Sound asleep! Practice and work wore me out.”

“This is an emergency. I need your help.”

“With what?”

“One question first—do you remember Mai Sakurajima?”

He didn’t have much hope. He’d asked dozens...maybe hundreds...of people about Mai without ever getting the answer he hoped for.

“Huh? Of course.”

“Yeah, figured you didn’t,” he replied, answering on reflex.

“What? Of course I *do*,” Yuuma insisted, still sounding sleepy.

Sakuta’s brain started spinning. What had Yuuma just said?

“Kunimi!”

“Ugh, why are you yelling?”

“You remember Mai Sakurajima?! *The* Mai Sakurajima?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

He didn’t know the reason. It made no sense. But Sakuta had finally found what he was looking for, in the way he least expected. Delight and surprise had his heart racing so fast it hurt.

“Is that it? Can I go back to sleep?”

“Wait. Gimme Futaba’s number.”

“Uh, sure...”

Yuuma was starting to wake up. Grumbling, he read out Rio Futaba’s cell phone number. Sakuta found a pad by the phone and scribbled it down.

“You’re gonna call her *now*, Sakuta?”

“That’s why I asked.”

“She’s gonna be pissed if you do.”

“Don’t worry. I would be, too.”

"Then, fine. You owe me lunch for this. Futaba, too."

"Got it. Good night."

"Yeah...night..."

Yuuma hung up.

Sakuta immediately dialed Rio's number. She answered.

"This is Azusagawa," he said.

"Do you know what time it is?" she complained grumpily. But she spoke clearly—maybe she was actually still up?

"One nineteen AM."

"One twenty-one. Your clock is slow."

"Oh, really?" *You'd think a business hotel would get that right.* "Got a minute? I need your advice on something."

"You've got yourself in trouble again, right?"

"I dunno if it counts as *trouble*."

"I can hear a shower running. Is that Sakurajima?"

"...How'd you know?"

That was way too on point. And something about it was bugging him.

"Your adorable sister wouldn't be taking a shower this late. And I can tell from the caller ID you aren't at home."

As she spoke, he realized what was wrong.

"Futaba, you remember Sakurajima, too? You know her?"

He had to be sure.

"Why would I not know someone that famous? Are you a total idiot?"

"Something incredibly dumb is happening. That's why I'm calling at such a stupid time."

Rio sighed. "Okay. Well, if you've got something stupid to say, I'll hear it out."

Sakuta took around twenty minutes to fill Rio in on everything happening to Mai. He did his best to leave conjecture out of it, only reporting what he'd personally witnessed. Rio asked a few questions along the way but mostly just heard him out.

"...What do you think?" he asked when he was done.

There was a long silence.

"I see," she said at last. There was a thoughtful sigh. "You and Sakurajima are way closer than I thought."

"Is that all you got out of it?"

"I did *not* want to hear your love story."

"I didn't ask for help on that end of things!"

"You just spent twenty minutes boasting about it. At this time of night."

"I wasn't boasting!"

“Bragging, then.”

“Be reasonable!”

“This is inherently unreasonable,” Rio grumbled.

“Yeah, I know, but...think about it. Compared to me being with *the* Mai Sakurajima, people not seeing her and forgetting she even exists seems totally normal.”

“You can say that again.”

“Argh...”

He’d been joking, but Rio readily agreed.

“But like I said before, I don’t actually think Adolescence Syndrome is real.”

“I know. Because it isn’t logical, right?”

“Yes.”

But she didn’t accuse Sakuta of lying outright because he’d shown her the scars on his chest and told her about what happened to Kaede. Rio had said, “It may not be logical, but if I believe your story, it does explain some things.”

Naturally. Sakuta was telling the truth, after all. Kaede’s Adolescence Syndrome was a big part of why he’d left home and come to Minegahara High. Otherwise, he’d just have gone to his local school, never met Shouko Makinohara, never even known Minegahara High existed.

“So what do you expect from me?”

“I need your help figuring out why this is happening and finding a solution.”

“That’s a big ask, Azusagawa.”

“I’m desperate enough to ask anyway.”

“.....”

“Uh, Futaba? You still there?”

“Kunimi once said...”

“Huh?”

Why was she bringing up Yuuma now?

“Your best trait is that you can say things like *thank you*, *sorry*, and *help me*.”

“I mean, it’s not like I say those things to anyone but the two of you.”

He was deflecting, embarrassed, and she just snorted dismissively.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll try to think on it. Don’t expect much.”

“I’m expecting a lot!”

“Look...”

“Thank you. It’s a huge help.”

Honestly, Sakuta was scared. He couldn’t see a way out. He hadn’t been this scared since they were in the worst of Kaede’s Adolescence Syndrome. He had no idea where to even start fighting. And that was

terrifying.

Maybe Sakuta would lose the ability to see Mai. To hear her voice. He might even forget she existed. That was the most terrifying thing of all.

“Will you be at school tomorrow?”

“We’re in Ogaki now, so...not in the morning, at least. Why?”

Rio wouldn’t ask his plans without good reason.

“Off the top of my head, school’s the only thing that connects you to Kunimi and me.”

“I see.”

“So I thought school might be the cause of it all.”

“...You might be right.”

Sakuta had just remembered something. Today—well, technically yesterday—shortly after he’d met up with Mai, they’d run into Tomoe Koga, the girl he’d met helping a lost child.

But there at the station, Tomoe had seen Mai just fine. So had her friends.

“Maybe coming out here was a waste of time...,” he said.

He filled Rio in on Tomoe and her friends.

“I wouldn’t call it a complete waste,” Rio said. “The information you gathered gives us a more accurate grasp of her situation. And that helped us establish the hypothesis that the root cause stems from the school.”

“Oh...well, that’s good. I probably won’t make it in before noon tomorrow, but I’ll be at school. Sorry for calling you in the middle of the night.”

“You’d better be.”

Rio yawned and hung up. Sakuta put the phone back on the cradle.

He realized he’d been standing up for no reason and sat down on the bed.

The shower had stopped. He’d been so focused on the call, he hadn’t noticed.

“Augh! Such a waste!” he murmured.

The door to the bathroom opened a crack. Mai poked her head out, a towel wrapped around it. He caught a glimpse of her shoulder, flushed from the bathwater, steam rising from it.

“Underwear!” she said.

“Huh?”

“I can wear the same clothes, but underwear and socks? Ew!”

“Should I wash them for you?”

“I’d rather die.”

“If it was your underwear, I wouldn’t care how filthy it was.”

“They’re not *filthy*!”

“Shame. That might be *more* valuable.”

“Stop with the sick fantasies!”

Mai took the towel off her head and threw it at Sakuta. It hit him right in the face. He’d been too busy staring at her glistening wet hair to dodge.

But not dodging had been the right choice. There was a sweet scent clinging to the towel—maybe the shampoo.

“Can I assume you’re totally naked right now?”

“I’ve got a bath towel on!”

“Ohhh!”

“Stop imagining it!”

“I’m free to imagine all I like.”

“Why are you such a sex fiend?!”

“How could I not get turned on when I’m sharing a hotel room with a girl as beautiful as you?”

“You’re blaming me for it?!”

“Even if I round down, at least half the fault lies with you.”

As he spoke, he stood up, checking his wallet.

“I’ll run to the convenience store and buy some underwear. I need a change myself.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ve got enough.”

He showed her the meager contents of his wallet. Before leaving Fujisawa Station, he’d taken out all the money he’d earned at work. It was only fifty thousand yen or so, but that was more than enough to buy the five-hundred-yen underwear convenience stores carried.

“No, I mean...aren’t boys embarrassed by that sort of thing?”

“Mm? Oh, sure, I guess. I’m used to it, though.”

“You are?” Mai blinked, not sure what he meant.

“After buying stuff for my sister’s periods, I just stopped caring. I even started getting a kick out of the staff’s reactions.”

Since Kaede was a homebody who never went out, he had to buy her clothes and underwear.

“You’re the worst kind of customer.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Wait, I’m coming.”

Mai pulled her head back and closed the door. She locked it again. She was really on her guard. No trust at all.

“I can handle it.”

“I’m afraid of what you’ll pick out.”

“It’s not like they have a wide selection.”

Convenience stores only carried the most basic of stuff.

“The very thought of putting on underwear a boy bought for me is gross!”

She must have been getting dressed in that tiny bathroom. He could hear her grunting slightly between words. That was pretty sexy, too.

After a while, he could hear a dryer running.

He was stuck waiting for over ten minutes before she emerged.

“Come on,” she said.

“Here we gooo.”

Sakuta and Mai left the hotel, taking the back door—mostly to avoid the front desk. A high school student traveling alone stood out like a sore thumb. No point in encouraging any more suspicion than Sakuta’d already drawn during check-in.

The fact that no one could see Mai was definitely a plus here. If they’d checked in as a couple, they’d have raised even more concerns, which might well have led to police involvement. Of course, if people could see her, they’d never have come all the way out here in the first place...

Sakuta looked up and down the street. Fifty yards down the road from the station was a brightly lit green sign—a convenience store.

They made that their destination.

This late at night, there were few people out and about. At first, neither of them spoke.

“It’s such a strange feeling,” Mai said at last. She had her hands clasped behind her back and seemed to be enjoying the sight of the sleeping town around her.

“What is?”

“Being in an unfamiliar city like this.”

Mai was deliberately making her heels click on the pavement like a marching soldier.

“I thought you traveled a lot, filming?”

“I didn’t go anywhere. I was *taken*.”

“Ahhh, I get that.”

He’d once traveled with his family all the way to Okinawa, much farther than Ogaki. And his junior high school trip had gone to Kyoto, a little farther out than here. And in elementary school, they’d gone to Nikko. He’d been to plenty of other places as part of school excursions, but none of those times felt like he’d gone there himself.

Like Mai said, he’d simply been taken there.

On some level, Sakuta was enjoying this trip, just like Mai. He’d probably felt a rush encountering a new experience as they hopped on the Tokaido Line at Fujisawa Station.

They’d picked the train with no set destination, just aiming to get as far as they could. Trying to find someone who could see Mai, someone who could remember her...

They'd come here themselves. They'd have to get back by themselves as well. That was stressful but also kind of fun.

It was like they were on an adventure together. Adolescence Syndrome aside, they had completely left their daily routine behind. And that sense of *new* was enjoyable.

"Whenever I wasn't filming, I was trapped in a hotel. Even if I had never been to the location before, everyone who lived there knew me, so I didn't want to walk around much."

"Is that a brag?"

"You know it isn't, but you ask anyway. Just craving attention?"

Her eyes were smiling. She saw right through him.

"You got me," he admitted sheepishly.

"You're like a little kid," Mai snorted. "But I suppose the strangest thing about this is that I'm walking through this unknown town with a younger boy."

"I certainly never thought I'd go someplace this far away with *the* Mai Sakurajima."

"You should be honored."

"It's an honor I will never forget."

Sakuta chose his words deliberately, fully aware of their meaning. It wasn't a concept they could avoid. Mai was definitely vanishing from people's memories.

"....."

Mai didn't answer.

That made Sakuta want to emphasize the point again.

"I'll never forget this."

".....But if you do?"

"I'll eat Pocky through my nose."

"Don't play with your food."

"That was your idea!"

There was a smile on Mai's lips, but that was all.

"Sakuta."

"What?"

"You swear?"

"....."

"You really won't forget me?"

Her eyes wavered. Like she was testing him.

"The image of your bunny-girl outfit is seared into my brain."

Mai let out a long breath. "You still have the outfit, right?" she asked. It sounded like she was absolutely certain he did. It was true, so...

"Of course."

"Then you've done horrifying things with it."

"Not yet."

“Throw it out when you get home.”

“Aww.”

“No protests!”

“I was hoping to get you to wear it again.”

“I don’t know how you can say that with a straight face.”

She seemed completely appalled.

Sakuta wasn’t giving up that easily. He kept staring at her.

“Well, maybe once,” she said, folding. There was only a little embarrassment in her voice. “To thank you for all of this.”

“No, thank *you*!”

“Fulfilling the sexual fantasies of a younger boy is nothing to me,” she said, though she wasn’t looking at him. It was too dark to be sure, but her face seemed pretty red.

“Well, first, we’ve got to get you some underwear.”

“I’m *not* letting you choose.”

They reached the store before the argument was settled.

The man behind the counter greeted Sakuta unenthusiastically. There were no customers. There was one other employee, seizing the chance to stock the candy aisle during a lull.

They found what they needed on a shelf near the door. Sakuta grabbed a basket and followed Mai over.

Socks, T-shirts, towels, stockings, and of course, the underwear and camisoles they were after.

He’d never really paid much attention before, but there was a better selection than he’d expected. Everything was folded up small in plastic cases, easy to grab and go.

The female underwear section consisted of panties and camisoles, sold separately. They came in S or M sizes, and the only colors available were black and pink.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Mai grabbed a pair of black panties and a matching camisole, dropping them in the basket. Then she added a pair of socks.

“Pink would be nice.”

“You’re not going to see them either way.”

“Shame. I’d love to.”

“Talk like an idiot, and you’ll become one.”

Mai stifled a yawn and headed for the beverage cases.

There seemed little point in insisting, so Sakuta grabbed a T-shirt, socks, and a pair of boxers for himself and followed her.

“Black works, too.”

“What did you say?”

“Never mind!”

Back at the hotel, they changed, then filled their bellies with rice balls and sandwiches. They'd eaten once on the way, but that had been over four hours ago—they'd both gotten pretty hungry since.

After that quick meal, Sakuta took a shower. When he emerged...

"Let's go back first thing tomorrow," he said.

Mai looked surprised to hear it. "Worried about your sister?" she asked.

"That, too. But I also found someone who remembers you."

"...You did?"

"Both my friends at Minegahara High."

"When did you...?"

"I called while you were in the shower."

He glanced at the phone in the room.

"Calling this late could end a friendship."

"I said sorry. It'll be fine."

"Such confidence."

"If either of them did the same to me, I'd forgive it."

"Let's hope you're right. But...oh. You *weren't* the last person who remembers me."

"Maybe the cause of this is at school."

He couldn't be sure. But it was the only lead he had. They had to place their hopes on it and act accordingly.

"Okay. Then let's get some sleep."

"Uh...so where should I sleep?"

Mai had already staked out a claim on the bed. She was wearing a bathrobe in lieu of pajamas. She looked up at him, not answering.

"The floor? The bathtub? I think the hotel will get mad if I sleep in the hall."

She stared at him for another long minute, then glanced down at the single bed.

She thought for a long time.

Then she asked, "Promise not to do anything?"

"I swear," he answered immediately.

"Liar." Not an ounce of trust. "But I guess I'm the one who let you lure me into a hotel."

"Don't make it sound like I tricked you!"

"I'll allow you to lie next to me. Only to sleep, mind."

"Really?"

"Would you prefer the hall?"

"I'd love to sleep with you."

Given the circumstances, that sounded like something else entirely.

"....."

It definitely seemed to arouse her suspicion. He hastily rephrased.

"I'd love to sleep next to you."

".....Fine."

Mai made room. Sakuta slipped into the space. The spot where she'd been sitting was still warm.

"....."

"....."

He tried to sleep. But...

"Sakuta....," Mai said.

"Yes?"

"This is really cramped."

The single bed was definitely not designed for two. Didn't seem like they'd be able to move around in their sleep.

"Should I move?" he asked, turning toward her.

She did the same, and their eyes met. Her face was inches from his. Even in the dim light, he could almost count her eyelashes.

"Say something."

"What?"

"Something fun."

"That's a high bar. Do you enjoy tormenting me?"

Sarcasm was his escape mechanism.

"Maybe," she said, her expression unchanged.

"If you don't enjoy it, why do you do it?"

"Because you enjoy me tormenting you."

"And so you toy with me in full knowledge of that! You're a born queen."

"Your masochistic streak is so obvious that I have to offer you some small reward."

"No man alive would be unmoved if a beautiful senpai tormented them."

"Is that a compliment?"

"A glowing one."

"Hmph."

The conversation petered out.

Without their voices to fill the space, the only sounds were the noise of the air conditioner and the ventilation fan in the bathroom. No cars passed on the street outside. Nothing came from the neighboring rooms.

It was just the two of them.

Sakuta was alone with Mai in a tiny single room.

He made no effort to take his eyes off her.

Mai made no effort to take her eyes off him.

"....."

"....."

A long silence passed between them.

Occasional blinks. The sound of her breath.

With no warning, her lips parted.

“We should kiss,” she said.

He was surprised. But not rattled.

“Feeling frisky, Mai?”

“You’re an idiot.”

She didn’t get mad at his joke. She didn’t get flustered or look embarrassed, either. Her only reaction was to smile like it was funny.

“We should sleep. Good night.”

She turned over, facing away from him.

Her hair flowed down. He could see the nape of her neck. If he kept staring, he was sure he’d put his arms around her, so he turned over, too, lying back-to-back.



“Sakuta.”

“I thought we were sleeping?”

“If I started shaking like a leaf and, through my sobs, said, ‘I don’t want to disappear!’ what would you do?”

“I’d put my arms around you from behind and whisper, ‘It’ll be okay.’”

“Then I’ll never say it.”

“Not enough?”

“I feel like you’d just ‘accidentally’ grab my breasts.”

“What about your butt?”

“Obviously off-limits,” she said, like she was brushing off a pest. “.....I’ve made up my mind to go back to work. I can’t disappear now.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“That’s right.”

“I definitely want to do TV and movies. I’d love to try stage acting, too. I want to work with amazing directors, costars, staff. Do great work. Feel like I’m alive again.”

“Then it’s off to Hollywood!”

“Ha-ha, that *would* be nice.”

“I’d better get your autograph now.”

“They’re already worth quite a bit, you know.”

“I suppose they would be.”

“I really...can’t disappear now.”

“.....”

“Not when I just got to know this sassy young boy who makes me actually look forward to school.”

“I won’t forget you.”

They lay back-to-back.

“.....”

She didn’t answer.

“I promise I won’t forget you, Mai.”

“How can you be sure?”

Sakuta ignored the question.

“So we can kiss anytime. Doesn’t have to be now. We don’t have to rush. It doesn’t even have to be me. I know you can make it to Hollywood. You can do anything you want. I’m sure of it.”

Mai was silent for a moment.

“...You’re right,” she said. “Shame. You blew your one and only chance to take my first kiss.”

“You should have warned me!”

“Too late now.”

He could hear her giggling.

But it soon died down.

“Thank you,” she said. “For not giving up on me. Thank you.”

“.....”

Sakuta didn’t answer. He was pretending to be asleep. If they talked any longer, he would definitely wind up with his arms around her.

After a while, her breathing slowed. Mai was asleep.

Sakuta tried to get to sleep himself. But he was too conscious of her lying next to him to sleep at all.

3

Sakuta never did drift off. He spent the hours until sunrise listening to the sound of Mai breathing next to him.

He definitely got turned on a few times. But no matter how hard he stared at her face, Mai never woke up. Getting all worked up alone made him feel like a dumb kid. Other times, the idea that he was the only one sweating over this was just depressing.

Drifting off to sleep would have been much better, but between her lying next to him and the fatigue of the long trip, his body was all tense, and he never even felt close to sleepy. There was a heat wriggling deep within him that spent the whole night messing with his head.

And after several wasted hours, the world outside the curtains grew bright.

Mai woke up at half past six, and they said good morning. Then they got ready to check out. But since they’d brought almost nothing with them, Sakuta was ready almost immediately.

Mai wasn’t as quick. She insisted on taking a bath first.

This took a full thirty minutes.

When she finally emerged, she insisted she still had to get ready, so he was forced out into the hall. Totally unfair.

To kill time, he went back to the convenience store to buy something for breakfast. He took his time...

When he got back, they each ate a cream bun and were finally able to check out. It was well past eight.

They walked back to Ogaki Station and hopped on a train. Now they just had to ride for a few hundred miles. But unlike the day before, they took the Shinkansen from Nagoya, making for a much faster trip back to Fujisawa Station.

Sakuta was back at home before noon. Hooray for bullet trains. They were unbelievably fast.

They both stopped off at home and met up outside thirty minutes later.

Mai was waiting out front in her uniform when Sakuta arrived, stifling a yawn.

“You look so out of it,” she said.

“You’re beautiful again today!”

“Your tie’s crooked. Hang on.”

She handed him her schoolbag and then reached for his collar, fixing his clothes.

“Never imagined we’d be acting like newlyweds so soon. Thank you.”

“Your face is stupid enough. No need to act the part.”

She snatched her bag back and stalked away.

“Ah! Wait!”

He ran after her, and they strolled side by side.

The streets he walked every day felt like old friends. If he didn’t know better, he would’ve sworn he’d been away a whole week.

Even though they’d only left the day before.

Less than that, since he’d been so late for their date. Even that was already turning into a distant memory.

As he mulled that over, he found himself yawning. Staying up all night had taken its toll. He felt ready to drift off at any moment.

“Huh? Didn’t you sleep?” Mai inquired, peering at his eyes. They must have been bloodshot.

“And who’s fault do you think that is?”

“You’re blaming me?”

“You wouldn’t let me sleep.”

“Too excited?”

“More nervous than anything, really,” he admitted, yawning again.

“You can be cute sometimes,” Mai said.

“You, on the other hand, have nerves of steel! You were out like a light.”

“I’ve been all over the place for filming my whole life. I used to sleep in the break room between setups. And...”

She broke off, looking like a kid who’d just thought of a great prank.

“Sleeping next to you is no big deal at all.”

“Good news! Next time I’ll have to try a few things.”

“You don’t have the guts to try anything.”

When they reached school, it was lunchtime.

Most students had already finished eating and were relaxing. Some kids were playing on the basketball court, and their cries drifted

across the schoolyard.

School was always like this, but it felt like ages since they'd last been here—like their first day back at school after spring or winter break.

As they changed into slippers at the entrance, Mai said, "I'm going to poke around."

"I'll drop in on Futaba. Oh, Futaba's one of the friends who remembers you..."

"Is that a girl's name? I'm amazed," Mai said, stopping in her tracks.

"That's her family name."

Still a girl, though...

"Right. Well, see you later."

Mai went off down the hall. Sakuta watched her go. She went past a group of girls carrying notebooks, a middle-aged geometry teacher wheeling a slide projector, and a group of girls gossiping excitedly about a hot guy on the basketball team.

None of them paid Mai any attention. None of them even looked at her.

This didn't strike Sakuta as odd.

It was always like that.

That was what it was like for Mai here.

The natural reaction toward seeing a problem no one wanted to engage. Everyone pretended not to see her. Acted like she was part of the air around them.

And when everyone ignored her, the result looked exactly like people couldn't see her at all. Minegahara students had treated her that way long before it started happening everywhere. Long before Sakuta had started attending this school.

Mai slipped through the crowds.

Just like she slipped through crowds affected by her Adolescence Syndrome.

"....."

It felt like fragments of understanding were piecing themselves together.

Like Sakuta was starting to see the shape of the root cause.

Rio's idea that the heart of the issue lay at school definitely felt right.

"Azusagawa."

Sakuta turned toward the voice and found Rio standing behind him, hands thrust in the pockets of her white lab coat.

When she saw him, she yawned. This made Sakuta yawn back.

"Bad news," she said.

He braced himself.

“Everyone but me may have forgotten Sakurajima.”

“.....?!”

His brow furrowed. That *was* bad news.

“At the very least, Kunimi doesn’t remember her.”

“Really?”

Rio wouldn’t make something like that up. This wasn’t a laughing matter, and Sakuta knew she wasn’t the type to joke about things like this in the first place.

But he couldn’t stop himself from asking. He desperately wanted it to not be true.

“When I mentioned her name, Kunimi was just confused. ‘Who was that again?’ he asked. I haven’t exactly asked anyone else, but...”

Sakuta looked around, searching for someone else to ask. The need for that soon passed, though.

Mai was running back toward the entrance. Out of breath, flustered—pale with fright.

When she caught her breath, she looked him in the eye.

“You can still see me?” she asked.

“Yes. Clear as daylight,” he said, nodding.

The tension drained from her face.

“Thank goodness...”

She sighed with relief.

But why?

Why could Sakuta and Rio see her but nobody else? Why had they forgotten Mai?

At the least, yesterday it wasn’t just the two of them. Yuuma, Tomoe Koga, and her friends had all been able to see Mai.

“Right, Tomoe Koga!”

Sakuta ran off alone, headed for the first-year classrooms.

He poked his head into each room on the first floor, finally locating Tomoe in the fourth room he tried. Class 1-4. She was with the same friends as the day before, eating lunch by the windows, their desks pushed together.

Sakuta went right over to her.

One of her friends saw him first and made a startled noise. They all turned to stare.

“Crap, the guy from...,” Tomoe said, then stopped herself.

Sakuta planted himself near their desks and asked, “Do you know Mai Sakurajima?”

Tomoe Koga and her friends all looked at one another and started whispering.

“What is this, Tomoe?”

“I—I don’t know!”

“Sakura...who?”

“Who the...?”

“You saw her yesterday at the Enoden Fujisawa Station,” he said.

They looked at one another again and then shook their heads.

“How do you not know her? She’s a famous actress!” Sakuta took a step forward. “Think about it! The really beautiful third-year... You met her!”

When he took another step closer, Tomoe looked frightened.

“You have to remember!” he demanded, putting his hands on her shoulders.

“I—I don’t know her!” she shouted, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Please!”

“Ow!”

He realized he was squeezing her shoulders.

“Stop it, Sakuta.” A voice in his ear. Mai’s hand on his wrist.

He slowly let go of Tomoe.

“Sorry,” he said. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“O-okay...”

“I’m really sorry. Excuse me.”

Apologizing again, Sakuta headed for the door, his feet heavy.

“Azusagawa,” Rio said. She’d trailed behind them and was beckoning him from down the hall.

“What?”

When Rio didn’t move, Sakuta left Mai’s side, moving over to Rio.

“I might have an idea,” Rio said, quietly, so only he could hear.

It looked like she was hesitant to say the rest.

“Tell me.”

“Azusagawa...did you sleep last night?”

That question was the start of her explanation.

After school that day, Sakuta and Mai went back to Fujisawa Station together and parted ways there.

Even at a time like this, Sakuta had a shift at the restaurant. He couldn’t exactly call in sick. “You should go,” Mai said.

He worked until nine, rubbing his tired eyes. On the way home, he stopped in the convenience store.

He did a circuit of the interior, scoping out the shelves.

He found the energy drinks on a rack near the registers, under the gelatin drinks.

They ranged in price from two hundred yen to the cost of a large beef bowl. He even found one that was over a thousand yen. He couldn’t tell what the difference was or what was in them.

He grabbed three at random, along with some caffeinated mint gum and tablets, then took it all to the counter.

It came out to just under two thousand yen. Between the round trip to Ogaki and the room at the business hotel, his wallet was feeling really light. There was almost nothing left in it.

But this was no time to get stingy.

He remembered Rio's words.

Nobody looked at Mai. Nobody tried to look. Mai was observed by no one, so her existence was indeterminate...and thus, she was disappearing. She wasn't gone—but it was like she was. If no one could perceive her, it was the same as if she didn't exist.

A chill ran down his spine.

He knew exactly what Rio was trying to say.

The cause was here at school, within the students' collective consciousness. Their disinterest in her was now entirely *unconscious*. She didn't even register in their minds. Rio was saying that these feelings—if they could even be called feelings—were the trigger that activated Mai's Adolescence Syndrome.

How could you change people's unconscious feelings? They weren't even aware a problem existed. They didn't think the problem *was* a problem. And there were nearly a thousand students like that at Minegahara High.

How could he turn their disinterest to interest?

“.....”

It was like he was facing into the darkness, and it was about to swallow him whole.

This was the true nature of his fear. The true cause. The true form of the enemy Sakuta had to defeat. The air he couldn't see but knew existed. The same air that, not too long ago, Sakuta had said was pointless to even try fighting against.

“But if the school is what started everything, why are people who have nothing to do with school unable to see Mai, either?”

“Maybe Sakurajima herself took what happened at school into the world outside.”

He had to admit that was possible, both when he first met her at the Shonandai Library or when she went alone to the Enoshima Aquarium. Mai had been acting like the air, and he'd felt like she was causing this herself.

But that wasn't true now.

Mai no longer wanted to disappear. He could be sure of that. She'd made up her mind to go back to work, and while she'd made it sound like a joke...

She'd asked:

and information can reach the other side of the world in seconds. The world we live in makes it happen.”

If he tried to argue the point, he was sure he could find something. Rio herself knew there were all kinds of holes in her explanation. But part of him understood that was the nature of the times they lived in. And the benefits of it...came with drawbacks.

“.....”

So Sakuta couldn’t find it in himself to argue. Frankly, at this point, Sakuta didn’t see the point in discussing just how the phenomenon had spread. The reality in front of them was all that mattered.

When he said nothing...

“Getting back on track...” Rio continued with the last part of her explanation. “If perception and observation are key, then I think it makes sense that sleep—where the consciousness is inactive—would be the trigger for losing these memories.”

While he was awake, he could still think about her. See her. But the moment he fell asleep, there was no way to be conscious of her. The ability to perceive her was naturally weakened. And while his consciousness was turned off, he would get infected by this anomaly.

“.....”

He shivered, thinking about the night before. If he’d fallen asleep there, he might have already forgotten Mai...

He went home, chewing caffeinated gum. He also drank his first ever energy drink. A strange sweetness, clearly different from other sugary beverages. A bit of a medicinal aftertaste.

Sakuta hadn’t really hoped for much, but he felt the effects immediately. He was awake again, his mind clear.

“What are you drinking?” Kaede asked, seeing him throw the bottle in the recycling. It was already eleven. Kaede was normally in bed by now, and she looked really sleepy. Her eyes were half-closed. He was pretty sure the only reason she was still up and about was because he hadn’t come home the night before.

“I’m not sleeping till I make up for what I missed out on yesterday!” she’d said.

So he spent a bit of time talking to her. Mostly about books she’d read.

Kaede started out insisting she was going to stay up all night, but in the end, she and the cat were asleep on the couch before midnight.

Sakuta picked her up and carried her to her room. The interior was covered in books. The shelves were full, their contents spilling into stacks on the floor. He had to pick his way through them to the bed.

He laid her down, said, "Sleep tight," pulled the covers over her, and turned out the light. He shut the door softly behind him.

Sakuta went to his room, tossing back a handful of mint tablets. His mouth and nose felt chilly.

He had something he had to take care of while his mind was still clear.

He sat down at his desk and opened a notebook. He wasn't trying to study. Midterms started tomorrow, so he probably should have at least a little, but his grades were a secondary concern.

Right now, he had to prepare for the worst.

He tapped the end of his mechanical pencil twice and started writing.

Everything he remembered about the last three weeks. Everything since he first met Mai.

He wrote all night long.

He waved, and Rio walked off, lab coat swaying. He hoped she would turn around and admit she was joking, but no such luck. She vanished up the stairs.

“Your hypothesis was correct,” he said.

By forgetting Mai, Rio had proved it.

Now Sakuta was the only one left.

Only Sakuta remembered Mai. Only he could hear her voice or see her.

“What a thrilling development!” he said, desperately trying to convert his fears into motivation.

The next day was May 28. The second day of midterms, and again, his results were unimpressive. But Sakuta was long past caring.

He was sleepy. Just sleepy.

Every time he blinked, he was tempted to just leave his eyes closed.

He hadn’t slept since their date on Sunday. It was now Wednesday. His fourth day without sleep.

Sakuta was well past his limit.

He was constantly nauseated. He had actually thrown up twice. Ever since, it had felt like there was something caught in his throat.

He was falling apart. His pulse felt erratic and far too strong. His complexion was awful. Yuuma had been worried on the train that morning. “You look like a zombie,” he’d said.

The one saving grace was that he’d already cleared his work schedule for midterms. There was definitely no way he could do a proper job in this condition.

His eyelids felt heavy. They refused to stay open. The light of the sun was brutal. No matter how hard he pinched his thighs, he didn’t seem to wake up. Nothing short of stabbing himself with a pencil got a reaction anymore.

“You seem tired,” Mai said on their way home.

She was still coming to school, even though only Sakuta could see her. “I’ve got nothing better to do,” she’d said. But he knew she had to be scared. Too scared to sit at home alone all day. Part of her must have been hoping, if she kept going to school, things might naturally go back to normal.

“I’m always like this during tests. Pulling all-nighters.”

“That’s what you get for not studying regularly.”

“You sound like a teacher.”

“Well, if you absolutely insist...”

“Mm?”

“I could help you study.”

“If we were in a room together, I’d just think about sex, so we’d

better not.”

“.....”

Mai gave him a shocked look. She clearly never expected him to refuse.

“A-ah. For the best, then,” she said.

“See you tomorrow.”

They parted ways outside their apartments.

Sakuta stepped onto the elevator and breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t told Mai he wasn’t sleeping. He knew if he did, she’d insist he stop going without sleep.

He didn’t want to worry her, and he’d already made up his mind to see this through—he didn’t want her feeling responsible for it.

At home, Sakuta sat in the living room, a physics book open in front of him. One he’d borrowed from Rio the day they got back from Ogaki. He was hoping it would give him a clue to resolve this.

It was an entry-level book on quantum theory. But even then, the difficulty level was so high, he just couldn’t process it. He was spending all day reading it instead of studying for midterms, but he could barely bring himself to turn the page.

The combination of sleepless eyelids and a physics book was deadly. Like a powerful sedative. He was keeping his flickering consciousness alive through sheer willpower, forcing his eyes to follow the words on the page.

He wanted to help Mai. That was all that drove him.

He spent an hour like this. Kaede was reading nearby, and her stomach started rumbling. Without a word, he stood up and started making dinner. They ate it together.

Sakuta looked across the table and realized Kaede was saying something. His eyes registered this, but he forgot to respond.

“.....”

“Hello?”

“Oh, huh?”

He was too sleepy to think straight.

“Are you okay?”

“Midterms,” he said, unsure that excused it.

“Don’t try too hard.”

“Yeah, I know.”

But no matter how hard it was, Sakuta couldn’t sleep now.

If he did, he’d forget Mai.

Maybe there was a chance he wouldn’t, but the odds were stacked against him.

In which case, Sakuta couldn’t let himself sleep.

He and Kaede finished dinner, and he went out for a walk. He

swung by the store again.

Sitting still after a meal was too dangerous. Even standing up, he was nodding off. He'd nearly fallen asleep standing on the Enoshima Electric Railway, his hand clutching one of the dangling handles. His legs had buckled, and he'd only clung to consciousness because his knees hit the businessman in the seat in front of him. It had been a very close call.

At the convenience store, he bought more energy drinks. From the large beef bowl price range. He'd been drinking too many of these, and the effects were steadily diminishing. Worse, the backlash was tremendous. Two or three hours after, he'd get even sleepier. But it was still better than nothing.

He left the shop, returning his wallet to his back pocket.

The wind brushed against his cheeks. Sakuta stopped in his tracks. Someone was waiting for him.

A wave of panic shot through him, like he'd been caught pulling a prank.

A nasty, clammy sweat broke out.

"What'd you buy?" Mai asked. She was in street clothes, legs apart, arms folded.

He tried to pull an excuse out of his groggy mind, but nothing emerged. Lack of sleep had made him stupid.

"Uh...well..."

Mai came closer and snatched the bag away. She peeked inside. "I knew you weren't sleeping," she chided.

"....."

He'd thought he was getting away with it, but apparently not. He knew he looked obviously unwell. Yuuma and Kaede had both pointed it out. It would have been weird for Mai *not* to have noticed.

"You thought you could hide this?"

"I wanted to."

"You're an idiot! You can't keep this up forever."

"I couldn't think of anything else."

He sounded like a petulant child.

Sakuta knew this could only go on so long. Humans needed sleep to live. And this wasn't going to solve the problem. But even knowing it might be a waste of time...this waste of time was Sakuta's only option.

This crazy phenomenon was making Mai suffer. They still hadn't found a way to stop it. They didn't even know if there *was* a way to stop it.

But they had to keep looking. Sakuta couldn't sleep until he did.

Even if he didn't find a solution, he wasn't about to simply give in and go to sleep.

He wanted to remember Mai for as many days as he possibly could. Each minute mattered. Every second he stayed awake was a second less where she was completely alone. All these sleepless nights had left his sluggish brain unable to think about anything else.

“Look how pale you are! You’re an idiot.”

“I entirely agree.”

“Let’s get you home.”

She returned the bag and headed back toward their apartments. Unable to think straight, Sakuta obediently followed her.

It was past eight when he got home.

Kaede must have been in the bath. He could hear her singing happily through the door. It was the jingle from a commercial for an electronics store. It wasn’t long, so she was looping pretty quick.

Sakuta turned in to his bedroom but got stuck in the door.

Mai was sitting on a cushion in the middle of the room, next to a low folding table she’d clearly set up herself.

“I thought if you went to a boy’s place at this time of day, it’d be like telling him he can do whatever he wants.”

“Eight is still in the clear.”

“Fine. But why are you here?”

“I thought I’d keep you company.”

“Romantically?”

“No. And you know that! I’m not letting you sleep tonight.”

“Sounds *exciting*.”

“If you start drifting off, I’ll slap you awake.”

“Wow, we’re going straight for the hard stuff.”

Mai seemed to be enjoying herself. How many slaps was she planning? He hoped this wasn’t becoming a new fetish.

“Come on, sit!” Mai insisted, patting the carpet.

He did as he was told.

“Where’s your textbook? Notes?”

“What are those for?”

“We still have one more day of midterms. I’ll help you study.”

“Engh... I’m good.”

He wouldn’t remember anything he studied in this condition. It would just make him sleepier.

“Were you the bookish type?” he asked.

“I was too busy working for most of my first year, but since the start of second year, I’ve never scored less than eight.”

Minegahara grades were on a ten-point scale. One being the lowest rating and ten the highest. So having all her grades eight or above was pretty impressive.

“What unexpected academic discipline.”

"I just study when I have the time."

"Most people would goof off every chance they get."

"Just focus! I am *not* all that matters to you."

"You are now."

Otherwise, he'd never be doing anything as grueling as forgoing sleep.

"Even if you do solve my problems, all you'll have left is a disastrous pile of answer sheets."

"Hearing something so logical is just making me sleepy."

"You're going to study."

"I'm sooo not motivated."

"Even with me as your private tutor?"

"If you wear the bunny-girl outfit, maybe I'll feel motivated."

"Are you like this with everyone, Sakuta?"

"I only talk like this to you, Mai."

"Hardly a compliment."

He yawned. The tears in the corners of his eyes stung.

"And if I put the bunny-girl outfit on, you'd think about nothing but sex. Then you'd learn nothing."

"I didn't think of that."

He wasn't thinking much at all. Sakuta was already just saying whatever popped into his head first.

"How about this?" Mai said. "If you score one hundred points on a test, I'll give you a reward."

This was a very enticing offer. He found himself leaning forward.

"Is this the legendary 'I'll do anything' offer?"

"Sure, sure. 'Anything,'" Mai said, clearly convinced it was impossible.

"I've got Math II and Modern Japanese tomorrow," he said, checking the schedule. He was starting to feel a bit more alert. "I might be able to get one hundred on Math II."

"What? Are you, like...smart?" Mai asked, horrified.

"Nah. I just do better with math."

Which was exactly why he should abandon Japanese and focus on Math II. With Japanese, there were so many subjective or arbitrary ways to lose points that it was hard to aim for a perfect score. But with Math II, the answers were objective, and as long as he showed his work, he had a solid shot at avoiding any weird deductions. It seemed doable to get full marks.

He immediately opened his Math II textbook.

But Mai snatched it away.

"This was your idea! Why are you stopping me?"

"I might have said 'anything,' but I'm not actually going to do *anything*," she said, scowling at him.

"I wouldn't ask for anything *crazy*."

"Really?"

"Nothing worse than 'Join me in the bath.'"

"That's already over the line."

"Aww."

"Th-that should be obvious!"

"Even if we wear swimsuits?"

"Swimsuits in the bathtub? Why would you even *think* of something that sketchy?!"

Her scornful look was like daggers. That definitely woke him up a bit.

"What about a lap pillow with you in the bunny-girl outfit?"

"Why do you seem to think *that's* a more reasonable suggestion?"

He'd thought it was, but Mai did not seem to agree.

"How about that Kamakura date we never actually got around to?"

This suggestion was so tame by comparison, it totally caught her off guard.

"Fine, but...you sure that's all you want?"

"You wanted something racier?"

"I didn't say that!"

She reached out and pinched his cheek, hard.

"Ow! I'm awake!"

"You really do have a lot of nerve for your age."

For the next two hours, she stayed with him, helping him study.

But it was all Modern Japanese. She refused to let him study Math II at all.

"'There's nobody around who can *ensure* your future.' 'Your future is not *assured*.' Both words are pronounced *hosho* but have different kanji."

"Professor, I'm sensing some spite in this problem."

"Just write them down!" demanded Mai, tapping the notebook in front of him.

Sakuta wrote down two sets of kanji, the Chinese characters found in Japanese writing.

"So which pair is used for 'Nobody can *ensure* your future'?"

"Well..."

He didn't actually know the difference, so he let his finger hover over one of the pairs, watching Mai's reaction, hoping he could deduce which was right from her expression.

But Mai was clearly onto his game.

She looked him right in the eye, smiling pleasantly. Even her eyes were smiling, which was all the more terrifying.

"You can also show me 'Sakuta's safety is not *assured* if he tries to

cheat on another question.”

“Sorry. I need a hint.”

“*Ensure* means making certain something happens, while *assure* means convincing someone it will.”

“Then ‘I can *ensure* Mai will have a happy future.’ And ‘We can be *assured* we’ll live happily ever after.’”

“Don’t change the sentences!” She rolled up the textbook and smacked him on the head. “It isn’t cute.”

Sounded like he got the answer right, at least. If he saw that on the test, he could probably get it again. Both the answer and Mai’s cross face were seared into his memory.

Mai kept giving him problems, and Sakuta kept studying kanji, feeling like he was playing a game.

But he couldn’t maintain that focus forever.

After they got through the section on homonyms, Sakuta stood up.

“I’ll get us some drinks,” he said. “Coffee okay? It’s just instant.”

“Mm.”

She was flipping through the kanji workbook, looking for another problem to give him.

He left her in his room, went to the kitchen, and started the kettle boiling.

While he waited, he glanced toward Kaede’s room. The lights were out. She must have been sound asleep.

He came back to his room with two mugs of instant coffee.

He put one in front of Mai.

“Milk and sugar?” she asked.

Sakuta’s whole goal had been to wake himself up, so he was taking it black and hadn’t thought to ask.

“I’ll go grab them.”

He came back with a sugar packet, some milk, and a spoon.

Mai was still looking through the kanji workbook.

“Here you go, Mai.”

“Thanks.”

She took the sugar and milk and poured them in her cup. She began slowly stirring.

These gestures struck him as distinctly feminine, and Sakuta savored the sight as he took a sip of coffee. Bitter black liquid hit his stomach. The heat of it felt like a relief.

“Your sister?”

“In bed.”

Kaede had popped in an hour earlier, seen Sakuta studying, and wished him luck.

“You’re an only child?” he asked. She seemed the type.

“No,” Mai said, cradling the mug with both hands.

“Oh?”

“After my father was free of my mother, he married again. Had a kid with her, so...a half sister.”

“She cute?”

“Not as cute as me,” Mai declared, like it was obvious.

“Wow, so harsh.”

His mind was starting to get bleary.

He felt dizzy. His eyelids were heavy.

“Would you like a girl who knows she’s cuter but goes around insisting other girls are cute anyway?”

“That does sound bad.”

“The worst.”

“But...your own sis—?”

He didn’t consciously trail off. The back half of the word just failed to emerge.

It felt like he was drifting away from his body.

Crap, he thought. But he couldn’t stop it.

He grabbed the edge of the table to support himself.

His eyes were already half-closed.

“Good. It worked.”

He lifted his eyes and saw Mai’s face. She was watching him gently, but there was a hint of fear behind it, and the edges of her eyes were glistening.

“Mai...what...?”

Her thin, beautiful fingers held something up.

A little bottle. The label read SLEEPING PILLS.

“Why...?” He could barely manage a whisper.

“Thank you for trying, Sakuta.”

“I can...still...”

He couldn’t even sit upright.

“You’ve done so much for me.”

“...No, I...”

“You’ve done enough.”

Her hand reached out and brushed his cheek. It felt warm. Comforting. And it tickled. But even that sensation was quickly fading away.

“No...I haven’t...”

He wasn’t sure the words were getting out.

“I started this whole thing alone. Even if you forget me, I’ll be fine.”

Mai herself was a blur now. Her hand was still on his cheek. Her fingers brushed against his ear.

“But thanks for everything.”

He hadn’t done anything worthy of her gratitude.

“And...I’m sorry.”

She hadn’t done anything requiring an apology.

“You can rest now.”

Her voice led the way. Sakuta’s eyes closed. His consciousness slipped into sleep.

“Good night, Sakuta.”

A deep, deep slumber...

Don't worry.

Right now, you might feel sad and upset...

But in the morning, you won't remember me or those feelings.

So relax and get some sleep.

I enjoyed these last few weeks.

Good-bye, Sakuta.



A world without you

1

He was shaking.

Someone was shaking him.

“...up.”

A voice from far away.

“...ke up.”

Getting closer.

“...Wake up!”

He knew that voice.

“It’s morning!”

White light pierced the darkness.

“.....Mm?”

As he woke, Sakuta’s eyes opened.

Bleary-eyed from sleep, he could just make out Kaede’s face. She was leaning over the bed, peering into his face. The sunlight streaming through the gap in the curtains hurt his eyes.

“Today’s the last day of midterms, right? You’ll be late!”

She shook him again.

“Oh, yeah, right...mid—”

He stifled a yawn and sat up.

His whole body felt like lead. Maybe a cold was setting in. Or he was running a fever. But he didn’t feel sick, just...really, really tired. That phrase seemed to fit better.

Fighting off the temptation to go back to bed, he forced his weary body onto its feet. Being absent or late during midterms would be bad. Makeup tests were a nightmare.

The clock showed 7:45. It was a ten-minute walk to Fujisawa Station and then fifteen minutes on the train itself. Maybe five minutes from Shichirigahama Station to his classroom. The whole trip took about half an hour.

He had to leave the house by eight at the latest. He didn’t have much time.

“Thanks for getting me up, Kaede. You really saved me.”

“Waking you up is what I live for!”

Her smile was adorable but didn't motivate him to heap more praise on her.

"You need to find other sources of joy in life."

"Like washing your back for you?"

"Sources unrelated to me."

"No thanks."

That was a quick refusal.

"I worry about your future," Sakuta said, opening his closet to change.

He took the uniform dress shirt off the hanger, but it slipped out of his hand and fell on the paper bag below.

"What's this?" he wondered, peeping into the bag as he picked up the shirt.

Kaede leaned in to look, too.

They both saw what was inside.

"....."

"....."

There was a brief silence.

"Wh-what is *that*?!" Kaede asked, pointing. A tremor in her voice.

Sakuta could ask the same.

A black leotard with a white fluff ball on the back. Black stockings and high heels. A bow tie. White cuffs. And the bunny-ears headband, which really pulled the whole outfit together.

This was *clearly* a bunny-girl outfit.

"Was I planning on making you wear this?" It was the only possibility he could think of.

"Huh?" Kaede froze, shocked.

He stuck the headband on her head.

"Not bad."

"I-I'm not wearing this! No way am I ready for anything this sexy!"

Sensing danger, Kaede scuttled out of the room.

Sakuta wasn't prepared to chase her around the apartment this early, so he put the outfit in the bag again and returned the bag to the closet.

"How stressed out was I?" he muttered.

He put his shirt on and buttoned it. Then his pants and his tie. The latter turned out kinda crooked.

"....."

Normally, he'd just leave without bothering to fix it, but today he felt like he should try again. He loosened the tie and redid the knot. It came out straight this time.

Before putting on his jacket, he stuffed his textbooks into his schoolbag. As he did, he noticed a notebook on his desk and picked it

up.

“What’s this?”

He flipped through the pages. They were pretty full.

Modern Japanese notes? On closer inspection, no.

It started with a warning and then read like a diary.

What is written here may be hard to believe, but all of it is true. Make sure you read till the end! You have to!

his bag, and shouted “I’m off!” to Kaede.
Then he left for school.

2

Sakuta sped through the ten-minute walk to the station a little faster than usual.

He passed through the residential area, crossed the bridge, and came out onto the main road. He got stuck at a few lights but was soon in the commercial area near the station. After passing pachinko parlors and electronics stores, he saw the station up ahead.

Fujisawa Station looked just like it always did this early. Streams of commuters bound for work or school filed inside. Grown-ups in suits poured out of the hub, destined for nearby offices. People changing trains headed for their connecting platform. Sakuta crossed the connecting passageway, one of many rushing to the Enoden Fujisawa Station.

When he entered the station gates, his usual train was still waiting. Catching his breath, he boarded the first car.

He grabbed a spot by the door on the far side, and someone joined him.

“Yo,” Yuuma Kunimi said, raising a hand in greeting.

“Hey.”

The train started moving. Yuuma hung on to the strap with both hands, examining Sakuta.

“You look better today,” he observed.

“Hmm?”

“You were full-on zombie yesterday, man. Were you always one to cram like crazy before tests?”

“Nah, I’m more likely to give up immediately and go to bed.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He’d gone to bed pretty early the night before. At least, he couldn’t remember anything clearly after maybe nine or ten. Earlier than usual, despite the tests.

Sakuta looked around the car. Several other kids in Minegahara uniforms. Lots of them had textbooks out, doing what they could to score the highest grades possible.

Yuuma took a textbook out of his own bag, reviewing a list of formulas.

While Sakuta distracted Yuuma from his studies now and then, the train took them past Koshigoe Station, and the view of the ocean opened up outside.

Sakuta felt like someone was staring at him.

“.....”

He glanced around, trying to find the source.

“What’s up?” Yuuma asked. Maybe he’d been too obvious about it.

“Thought someone was looking at me.” As he spoke, his eyes met the girl standing at the next door. Tomoe Koga. Her uniform still looked brand-new.

“Mm? Her? A first-year?”

Tomoe made such an obvious show of looking away even Yuuma picked up on it.

“You know her?”

“She and her friend come to watch basketball practice sometimes.”

Sakuta recognized the girl with her, too.

“My teammates think they’re both pretty cute.”

“Oh, so she was staring at *you*.”

He felt like an idiot now.

“I don’t think so,” Yuuma said, turning his attention back to his textbook.

“Why not?”

“When she’s at practice, she’s usually looking at one of the third-years.”

“Huh.”

“Given that you don’t even know the names of your own classmates, I’m surprised you know a first-year. Something go down?”

“Kinda.”

“Ooh. Fill me in.”

Yuuma put his book away, shouldering Sakuta with a grin.

“Look, we’ve just kicked each other in the butt. No big deal.”

Last Sunday, he’d tried to help a lost child, a certain someone jumped to conclusions, and things got weird.

“Any time butts get kicked, there’s definitely trouble involved.”

“These things happen sometimes.”

“Not to me, they don’t. Where are you going with this?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“Riiight...”

Sakuta stared out the window, signaling the conversation was over.

Something was definitely bugging him.

It wasn’t his meeting with Tomoe Koga, though. For some reason, he couldn’t remember exactly how he’d come to be at that park in the first place.

When the train reached Shichirigahama Station, everyone in a

Minegahara uniform filed off onto the tiny platform.

Sakuta was no exception.

Enjoying the smell of the sea, he and Yuuma strolled the short distance to the school gates.

Around them, students were chatting. "More tests. I'm so doomed." "I didn't study at all." "Me, either!" "People who say that always *have*."

Midterms were a mutual problem faced by the entire student population, but otherwise, it was a typical morning.

This was their daily routine.

The same things they always did on the way to school.

Nothing especially fun or particularly aggravating.

Everyone just getting through it.

Everything around Sakuta was *normal*.

The two first-years dashed past Sakuta and Yuuma. Tomoe Koga and her friend. Talking about their plans after tests were over, karaoke and the like.

"You got any after-test plans, Sakuta?"

"Work. You?"

"Just practice. Got a tournament coming up."

"Oh. Well, good."

"Mm? How so?"

"If you had a date, I'd have been annoyed."

"That, I'm saving for the weekend."

"Sometimes I hate you, Kunimi."

"You're gonna say that to my face?"

"Better than hiding it."

As they traded quips, the two of them reached the school entrance.

Sakuta took his slippers out of the shoe locker and changed into them, then went up the stairs to the second-year classrooms.

Yuuma was in a different class, so they split up in the hall, and Sakuta went to room 2-1 alone.

Front seat by the window.

First test of the day was Math II. Second was Modern Japanese.

Some students were frantically cramming, others calmly reviewing notes and getting ready for the exam. And a few were sleeping at their desks, already having given up. Saki Kamisato was at her desk (diagonally behind him) chomping away on Pocky. It was rather early for a snack. Maybe a gamble that the sugar would get her brain moving.

Sakuta took his textbook out, too. His nose was itching like crazy.

"Hope I'm not getting a cold..."

He rubbed his nose with a tissue and began looking over the example problems for higher order equations.

He had this weird compulsion to try for a good score.

After he'd given everything a once-over, a shadow fell over his book.

Someone was standing in front of him.

He knew who it was without looking up. Even with his eyes on the book, he could see the edge of her white lab coat dangling below the hem of her skirt.

"Not often you come see me, Futaba."

"Here."

Looking annoyed, Rio held out a Western-style envelope.

"A love letter?"

"Nope."

"Figured."

Sakuta knew where Rio's feelings lay.

He took it from her and peered into the envelope. There was, unsurprisingly, a letter inside. He glanced up at Rio to see if he should read it.

"....."

She nodded wordlessly. Sakuta opened the letter and ran his eyes over it.

This is a ludicrous pseudoscience extrapolation of the Theory of Observation, but let us assume that all matter in the world is only given shape once it is observed by someone else. In this case, if the cause of

's disappearance stems from the entire student body's unconscious ignoring of her, then if Azusagawa provides a reason to exist that overwrites that, he may be able to save . Essentially, closing the lid on what they don't want to see should return the wavelength to the original probability before was given form... In other words, reverting her to a state before her existence was defined, to when she was like ether. The student population's unconscious denial of her existence can be overwritten by Azusagawa's love.

A weird letter, filled with suspicious blanks. The contents made no sense at all. But it was clearly written by Rio, for him.

"....."

He looked up, awaiting explanation.

"I dunno, either. I found it last night, stuck in my Math II textbook."

"What the heck?"

Rio placed another identical envelope on his desk.

"This was with it."

Even more confused, Sakuta read the second letter.

It was only a single line long.

Don't think. Just give this to Azusagawa.

Clearly a note Rio had left for herself.

It reminded Sakuta of the delusional notebook he'd found in his room that morning.

Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but he couldn't remember what. Just a general feeling that something was missing.

"So there you have it," Rio said, turning to leave.

"Uh, wait," he called after her, but the bell rang, forcing him to drop it for now.

The teacher came in, and homeroom began.

"It's the last day of midterms, but try not to go too crazy once they're done," he warned.

Sakuta read Rio's letter over again.

This is a ludicrous pseudoscience extrapolation of the Theory of Observation, but let us assume that all matter in the world is only given shape once it is observed by someone else. In this case, if the cause of

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"My love, huh?"

He had no clue what that meant.

3

The Math II test went pretty well.

He'd filled in every answer, properly showing his work. He felt like this was important for some reason.

Sakuta usually couldn't be bothered to check his work, but this time, he'd taken particular care to do so. He had a shot at a pretty good grade.

The second test was Modern Japanese.

When the bell rang, the entire class opened their exam books as

one. The room filled with the sound of scratching pencils.

Sakuta wrote his name, class, and seat number. Then he went to the first problem. Reading comprehension. He checked the questions first, then read the passage.

It took about twenty minutes, but by the end, that first hill had been conquered.

It was followed by another lengthy passage. This one hadn't been in their textbooks.

It looked like it was going to take a while, so Sakuta decided to skip ahead to the kanji quiz at the back.

The dreaded homonym section.

1. *I can _sure he'll pay.*

2. *I can _sure you the country will remain stable.*

Both had *hosho* in katakana, and he had to write in the kanji.

Without hesitation, he wrote *ensure* in the first problem and *assure* in the second.

“.....”

When he finished, he stopped, feeling his pencil waver.

A doubt unrelated to the test itself had filled his mind.

The reason he'd known this answer was because he'd studied it the night before.

But he couldn't quite remember the specifics.

Something felt wrong. The feeling started in his head and gradually took over his entire body. It was very unpleasant, like he was trying to remember something that refused to come out. It was right on the tip of his tongue but was stuck there.

The more he thought about it, the more upset he got. He felt like something was screaming at him from the inside.

“...What is this?”

He couldn't explain it. It felt like...

Like a glow of joy in his heart.

Like bittersweet memories.

Like a memory of good times.

But also an intense sadness accompanying them.

One emotion after another tore through him and faded, then came flooding back. Wave after wave, shaking him to his core.

And then something fell on his answer sheet.

He was worried his nose was running, but it wasn't that.

Something had fallen from his eye.

A tear.

He quickly looked up. He couldn't just start crying in the middle of a test.

He took a quick breath, trying to steady himself, and someone's voice floated across his mind.

"So which pair is used for 'Nobody can ensure your future'?"

He knew that voice.

"You can also show me 'Sakuta's safety is not assured if he tries to cheat on another question.'"

The mist clouding his mind was clearing.

"Ensure means making certain something happens, while assure means convincing someone it will."

He'd answered the questions just like she'd told him to.

The pen fell from his hand.

He shouldn't be sitting here taking this test. Not now.

"Whoa!"

The classmate behind him had flinched, surprised. The girl next to him let out a squeak.

Everyone glanced up from their answer sheets, staring at him.

The teacher monitoring the test from the back looked at him, confused. "What's up, Azusagawa?"

"Number two," Sakuta said.

A laugh went round the room.

"Focus, people!"

While the teacher was distracted, Sakuta made a beeline for the hall.

He went right past the bathrooms and down the stairs.

The entrance was too far in the wrong direction, so he just clambered out a first-floor window.

He'd remembered something important.

Memories of *someone* important.

There was something he had to do for her.

"Ugh, this is gonna suck..." he muttered, cringing already.

Minegahara's schoolyard lay before him. He walked to the middle of it, measuring each step.

"This is such a stupid idea."

Rio's letter had led him to a plan.

The last line.

The student population's unconscious denial of her existence can be overwritten by Azusagawa's love.

He wouldn't know if this was the right answer unless he tried.

Frankly, he didn't think the odds were in his favor. After all, Sakuta was about to fight the air itself.

Push, pull, or slap it, the air would never care. The air in the school. The same air he'd spent this entire time refusing to fight.

The people responsible for creating it had no idea they were involved.

And if they weren't aware of that, no matter how passionately he argued, his thoughts and feelings would never reach them.

They'd just laugh at his desperation.

The more worked up he got, the frostier their stares would become.

He'd just be met by telepathic, unvoiced emotions telling him to read the room.

That was the world they lived in, and Sakuta was acutely conscious of his own place in that world.

It was easier to follow the lead of the person next to you. Deciding what was right and wrong on your own burned too many calories, and the stronger your own opinions, the more it hurt when someone disagreed. Simply agreeing with "everyone" was safe. Secure. Never looking at anything you didn't want to see. Never thinking about anything you didn't want to worry about. Leaving all that to others.

The world was heartless like that.

So heartless it would unconsciously isolate someone and turn its back on whomever it had ostracized. To protect the air and to protect yourself, it was easy to pretend you didn't notice. No matter who got hurt.

The world was so heartless, it could join in that silent understanding and feel no pain when others got hurt by it.

But "Everyone's doing it, so I did, too" wasn't reason enough for someone to have to suffer. "Everyone's doing it, so it must be right" wasn't necessarily true. Who defined *everyone* anyway?

Had he not met her at the Shonandai Library that day, Sakuta might have remained part of that nebulous "everyone." He would have been just another contributor to her suffering.

But now that he'd figured it out, he had to settle this.

Even if that set him against the school itself.

Against the entire student body.

Against the air he'd been so desperate to avoid fighting... He could no longer turn his back on that problem.

Because he'd found something more important than maintaining the status quo.

He'd enjoyed the time he'd spent with her.

How she'd always teased him for being younger than her. The way she'd made sex jokes and embarrassed herself so much she turned bright red. And then how she tried to hide it, stubbornly standing her ground.

The childish way she'd gone all sulky when Sakuta didn't do what she wanted.

She was a bit selfish, domineering, and temperamental. But despite the year advantage, sometimes her inexperience showed. She'd

stomped on his foot, pinched his cheek, and even slapped him.

Getting yanked around by her had been the absolute best. When she'd retorted, grown indignant, or called him cheeky, he'd been delighted beyond all measure.

Only she could make Sakuta feel that way.

She was the only person in all the world who could.

And now that he knew that joy, life was pointless without her.

No matter what the cost, he had to get that joy back.

This was the price he had to pay.

He may have lost Shouko Makinohara without ever saying a word, but he wasn't about to let that happen twice.

He never wanted to feel like that again.

"I'm done with always reading the room. To hell with it!"

At the center of the yard, Sakuta slowly turned to face the school building.

Three stories loomed over him.

A thousand students were inside those walls.

The size and numbers were both overwhelming. And if everyone ignored his efforts, he was done for.

He had no plan.

But he knew what he had to do.

It was time to stop fretting about one thing or another.

He had to do what he thought was right.

Do what he felt was right.

To hell with all the reasons and excuses.

Sakuta planted his feet firmly beneath him.

He took a deep breath, gathering strength from his very core.

Then he launched the first shot at the top of his lungs.

"Listen up, everyone!"

Everyone was focused on midterms. The school was quiet. His voice carried far.

"I'm Sakuta Azusagawa!"

The vibrations were already making his throat hurt. But he wasn't backing down.

The first reaction came from the staff room. A window opened, and three teachers leaned out. They were waving him to come over, but Sakuta ignored them.

"From Class 2-1! Seat number one."

A stir was starting to run through the whole school.

"I've got a message...!"

He sensed people whispering, "Outside!"

One set of eyes after another turned toward the windows.

"For Mai Sakurajima, Class 3-1!"

When he said her name, he felt goose bumps all over him,

emotions rushing out of every pore and follicle. It felt right, like all the pieces had just fallen into place. In that moment, he knew for a fact his feelings for Mai were real.

Sakuta exhaled, expelling all the air from his lungs. Then took another big breath. He looked at the school, at the classroom windows, at the students gathering around them, all staring back at him.

With the eyes of a thousand people on him, Sakuta let his feelings explode.

“I love you, Mai Sakurajima!”

He hit the school with everything he had.

“I love you, Mai!”

It almost felt like he was trying to rip his own throat open. He wanted everyone in town and beyond to know how he felt.

So that no one could ignore him.

So that no one could pretend they didn't see.

He put everything he had out there in the open.

His breath didn't last, and his shout left him coughing.

There was a long, confused silence.

Then a flurry of whispered questions shook the air.

All the students were staring out at the yard, down at Sakuta. Their collective gaze a giant hammer beating down on him. But rather than a single fatal blow, it was an indecisive, middling pressure grinding against him. A slow, painful, crushing weight.

He wanted to turn and run. Right out the school gates all the way back home.

His passionate declaration of love was whiffing hard.

“Ah, dammit! I knew this would happen. I'm just embarrassing myself here. Shit.”

The frustration seethed out of him.

“This is why I didn't want to fight with air!”

Bathed in their stares, Sakuta's fingers scrabbled through his hair.

“This is the worst...”

Again, the urge to run for it crossed his mind. His eyes turned toward the gates.

“.....”

But his feet never took a step in that direction.

“I've come this far. If I don't get a reward from Mai, what's the point?”

Half out of sheer spite, Sakuta turned back to the school and started yelling again.

“I wanna hold your hand and walk down the beach at Shichirigahama!”

He didn't stop to think.

“I wanna see you in that bunny-girl outfit again!”

Sakuta just let his feelings lead him along.

“I wanna hold you in my arms and cover you in kisses!”

He barely even knew what was coming out of his own mouth.

“My point is...! I love you, Maiiii!”

His scream echoed across the sky. Every student and teacher in the school stared at him, which felt unbelievably horrible...but in that moment, Sakuta was too exhilarated to care.

A silence settled over the school.

Like everyone had agreed to do this beforehand. Like a collective gulp.

Sakuta wasn't sure why.

A student he didn't recognize was pointing out the window at him.

He didn't know why. At first, he thought they were making fun of him.

He only changed his mind when he realized the finger was pointing past him.

He heard footsteps in the dirt. Someone was standing behind him.

Sakuta gasped...and her voice reached his ears.

“I can hear you just fine. No need to shout.”

It felt like ages since he'd heard her voice. Like he'd been waiting for years to hear it again.

Sakuta spun around.

A whoosh of sea breeze blew past her feet.

The hem of her skirt fluttered.

Her usual black tights were visible underneath. Her feet were planted shoulder-width apart. One hand rested on her hip while the other brushed her hair back against the wind. Her eyes made her look mature, but the hint of anger on her face made her seem younger.

A wave of emotion raced up through Sakuta's body.

Mai was standing there, less than ten yards away.

“You'll bother the neighborhood.”

“I just wanted everyone in the world to know.”

“They don't all speak Japanese.”

“Oh! I didn't think of that.”

“You're so dumb,” she said. She hung her head, as if restraining herself.

“Better than pretending I'm smart.”

“That's even dumber.” Her shoulders shook. “A stunt like this is just going to generate more rumors about you.”

“If they're rumors about us, I'm all for it.”

“That's not what I... You idiot.”

“.....”

“Dammit, Sakuta!” she yelled and looked up, tears pouring down her cheeks.

Her first step toward him was in slow motion.

And then she was running.

Sakuta held out his arms, ready to sweep her up in them.

She was three steps away. Two. One. And then a crack echoed across the schoolyard. The sound rang through the skies above.

Shocked, Sakuta just gaped at her.

A moment later, his cheek started throbbing.

Only then did he realize Mai had slapped him.

“Huh? What was that for?” he asked, genuinely baffled.

“You lied to me!”

There were still tears in her eyes. She glared at him as if her fears were about to explode uncontrollably.

“You said you wouldn’t forget me!”

At last, he understood. She was right to be mad at him. He had lied to her.

“Sorry,” he said, pulling her trembling body in close.

He gingerly tightened his grip on her. Mai buried her face in his shoulder.

“It’s unforgivable.”

Her voice was muffled.

“Sorry.”

“I won’t ever forgive you.”

Mai rubbed her face on his shoulder, sniffing.

“Then I won’t let go until you do.”

“Then you’ll be holding me the rest of your life.”

Her voice was still wet with tears.

“Uh...”

“Is that a problem?”

She’d stopped crying, forcing her emotions back down.

“No man would object to a beautiful senpai saying— Ow! Mai, that’s my foot!”

“You got me to say all this, and you’re still going to try to hide behind generalizations? How dare you!”

“Um, my foot...”



"You like getting stepped on, right?"

"Sorry. I'm sorry! I regret it! Please forgive me!"

She was grinding her heel, and it really hurt.

"Anything else to say for yourself?"

"If you were scared to the point of tears, you shouldn't have given me sleeping pills!"

"These tears are a performance to mess with your head."

"Then thank you for making me give up the whole no-sleep thing."

"You're welcome. But I don't want gratitude from you right now."

Her heel was grinding into his foot again.

"You know what I want."

She applied more pressure.

Sakuta gave up and said the words she wanted to hear.

"I love you."

"Really?"

"Sorry. That was a lie. I'm absolutely crazy about you."

"....."

There was a brief silence, and then Mai took a step back. Her tears were gone. Only a few traces remained on her cheeks.

"Sakuta."

"What?"

"Say that again a month from now."

"Why?" he asked, unsure what that meant.

"If I answer you here, it'll feel like I just got swept up in the moment."

"I was hoping to sweep this moment right into a kiss, personally."

"My heart's racing, but...it might just be the situation," Mai said. She turned her head away, blushing. The hint of red on her cheeks was beyond cute.

"I'm surprised you can stay so calm."

She wasn't falling for the suspension-bridge effect.

"And I want you to think about it, too."

"About what?"

He knew how he felt. There was nothing left to think about.

"I'm older than you."

"That's a perk!"

"I'm a little hesitant to go out with a younger boy."

"You don't trust me?"

"No...I do, but..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It just feels like I'm seducing you."

"You totally are, so..."

"I am not!"

“You’re always leading me on!”

Just off the top of his head, he could already recall plenty of intimate contact. Combined with all the cheek pinching and foot stomping, the result was a fairly healthy number.

“A-am I being clear?”

“I dunno...”

“No whining.”

“I can’t wait a month! How about I just say it every day?”

Mai looked surprised but also pleased. She smiled.

“Fine, but you’d better keep that up for a month. If you miss a single day, I’ll assume you changed your mind.”

She poked Sakuta in the nose and shot him an impish grin. He wanted that expression all for himself. But just this once, he was letting everyone see it.

The entire student body of Minegahara was watching them, stunned, mouths hanging open. No one knew how to react. Everyone was clearly watching those around them, waiting for the decision to be rendered.

“Everyone sure does like going with the flow,” Mai said sarcastically. She glanced around the windows, then took a deep breath. Then she yelled, “The stories about Sakuta sending classmates to the hospital? Those are nothing but rumors!”

There was a brief silence.

Then she turned back to Sakuta, looking proud of herself.

“You wanted everyone to know, right?”

Come to think of it, they’d talked about it on the Enoden.

A moment later, a wave of surprise washed over the students. The whole school was getting excited. Everyone stared at them, fascinated.

“...Not the reaction I expected,” Mai said.

Naturally. It wasn’t the facts she’d stated that got such a reaction out of them.

“Mai, you called me by my first name. I think they’re reading into that a bit.”

In that instant, they’d all stopped worrying about what everyone else was thinking and pounced on the potential scandal before them, obeying their deep-seated instincts. Truly, the wonders of adolescence.

“Thanks to you, we’re drawing a lot of attention.”

“There’s only a thousand people here. Hardly a *lot*. You’re so sensitive.”

Those experienced with fame certainly had a different perspective.

“Maybe it’s three or four zeros too few for you, Mai, but...”

Eventually, someone decided to put an end to this. Sakuta’s homeroom teacher, the principal, and a man in a tracksuit—the PE instructor—came running toward them.

“Oof, I’m in for a long lecture, huh?”

“Don’t worry.”

“On what grounds?”

“I’ll come get yelled at with you.”

“Oh. That does sound better.”

At least he could be with her.

Mai and Sakuta started walking toward the school.

Side by side.

And thus, Mai Sakurajima returned to the world.



And in the Light of Dawn

After spending May wrestling with Adolescence Syndrome, Sakuta spent June in relative peace.

He'd promised to tell Mai he loved her every day, so he did.

Screaming his love from the center of the schoolyard had certainly changed things.

No one mentioned the hospitalization incident anymore. Now he was an outsider for being either cringey or infamous. Just walking down the hall summoned subdued snickering from all directions. Being at school was possibly more uncomfortable than ever.

But he had Mai back, so he told himself, "Whatever." It was somewhat necessary for Sakuta to have that attitude to get through it.

"I knew your heart was made of solid steel!" Yuuma said, doubled over with laughter.

"I would have died of shame," Rio said. "You really are a rascal, Azusagawa."

"What does that even mean?"

"When those hospitalization rumors started, who was it who insisted, 'Fighting the air is pointless'?"

"Ohhh, that was Sakuta! I totally heard him say it!"

Sakuta remembered that, too. And he hadn't changed his mind.

"You can't get serious about your own problems, but if it's for a beautiful senpai, no shame is too great. I don't know a better word for that than *rascal*."

He couldn't really think of a good comeback for that.

"....."

Like Rio said, he'd never once tried to change the air around himself, but when Mai was in trouble, he'd gotten all worked up. Which led to screaming his declaration of love in the center of the yard.

"I can make fun of you for this *forever*."

"I'm gonna be hearing about this in my twilight years, too?"

That actually didn't sound like a bad life...he tried to tell himself. A few days later, Sakuta stopped by the science lab.

"Futaba."

"What?"

“Does this mean your hypothesis was correct?”

“No idea. If Adolescence Syndrome is defined by unstable teenage psyches and tricks played on the mind by powerful misconceptions, then scientific proof is of no use whatsoever.”

“I guess not...”

He thought she was on the right track, though.

Mai had been acting like the air, so the student body had treated her like air. Since all those thought processes had been unconscious, the distinction between her and the air had vanished. It changed from metaphor to fact, becoming their reality.

And Sakuta felt sure this was happening in other schools. Anywhere a lot of people gathered would start to develop an air of its own...

In Mai's case, the silent understanding within the school had spread to the world at large via Adolescence Syndrome. That was all it was.

Like Rio said, there was no point dwelling on it further.

As he was about to leave the science room, Rio called after him, eyes never leaving the experiment she was preparing.

“Well, if our world can be transformed by a single romantic confession, it's a pretty simple place. You proved that, Azusagawa.”

He'd heard about a lot of things from her, but this sounded like the single greatest truth.

“Maybe,” he said.

At the very least, a single confession had changed his life for the better.

Mai had her life back and was steadily moving forward.

She started by announcing her return to work.

And the scale of that press conference was certainly “Mai Sakurajima” sized. Part of the process had involved meeting her mother and talking things over, but given the way Mai had stopped by Sakuta's workplace after and taken her stress out on him, they hadn't exactly made up.

But if they were arguing every time they met, that was certainly one definition of family... Besides, Sakuta was relieved to know Mai's mother remembered her at all.

And so time passed.

A month later, it was June 27. A Friday.

Kaede woke up Sakuta, and he got ready for school, listening to the morning news on the TV.

“And a big win for the Japan team!”

Japan's soccer fortunes seemed to be on the rise.

“Good morning. Today is Friday, June twenty-seventh. Our top

story today is the results of yesterday's big game."

Sakuta wasn't sure who Japan had played, but the excitement in the newscaster's voice made it clear this was a pretty big deal.

The highlight reel started with a free kick near the end of the first half. The goalie dived the wrong way, letting the ball score a hit in the net on the far side.

Sakuta watched that, said "I'm outta here" to Kaede, and left the house like always.

He walked to Fujisawa Station. Then a fifteen-minute ride on the Enoden. He got off at Shichirigahama Station, joining a flood of students in matching uniforms as they passed through the school gates.

Nothing of interest happened. But nothing unusual happened, either. He felt grateful for the normalcy.

Sakuta ate lunch with Mai in an empty third-floor classroom. There were no other students around. Just the two of them.

They sat on either side of a desk by the windows, overlooking the ocean.

Mai had made their lunches, which was simply delightful.

This was the result of a conversation they'd had the day before.

"Can you cook, Mai?"

"I can. I've been living alone long enough."

"Oh? Really?"

"What, you don't believe me?"

"Well, you always buy your lunch."

"Then I'll make us lunch tomorrow."

That was all it took.

She took the lid off the lunch box. Quite the spread. Fried chicken, a sweet rolled omelet usually called *tamagoyaki*, potato salad, cherry tomatoes, and even a side of *hijiki* and soybeans.

Conscious of Mai's watchful eye, Sakuta tried each in turn. They were all good. Not strongly seasoned, but the delicate flavor was truly delicious.

"Now you'll apologize for your rudeness yesterday and beg my forgiveness," Mai said triumphantly. Clearly, she'd taken his expressions as a sign of victory.

"Sorry. I was out of line. Cheeky, even! I apologize."

He bowed his head. It was a small price to pay. Getting to eat Mai's food was already a total victory in Sakuta's mind.

"I'm glad you understand."

And Mai was pleased to have proved her skills. It was truly a win-win.

"Uh, Mai," he said, looking her right in the eye.

“What?”

“I love you. Please go out with me.”

“.....”

Mai looked away. She took some egg from her lunch and ate it.

“.....”

She chewed slowly.

“.....”

He waited for her to swallow, but she still didn’t answer.

“You’re just going to ignore that?!”

“I’m just not feeling the magic here,” she complained with a weary sigh. “When you say the same thing every day for a month, the novelty wears off.”

“This was your idea!”

“I said to ask me again in a month. You’re the one who decided it had to be every day.”

“Fair.”

“Oh, right. I landed a part in a TV series that’s airing in July.”

“Whoa! You’re just changing the subject?!”

Had this situation ever been treated so dismissively?

Ignoring his protests, Mai pulled a script out of her bag. It was printed on yellow paper and had *Episode 6* on the cover.

“It’s a single episode in the middle of the season on a late-night show, but...”

Maybe a tiny part for someone with as many lead roles as Mai. But he could tell from her face she was just happy to be working again. He felt like he’d never seen her so excited about anything.

But that didn’t change the fact that she’d ignored his asking her out.

“Augh, what’s happened to my life?”

He turned and stared at the sea. It was the height of the rainy season, but today was a rare clear day. A perfect day for a walk on the beach.

“What? Are you not happy I’m back at work?”

“I’m delighted!”

“And there’s a kiss scene.”

“...Say that again?”

He felt like she’d just said something alarming.

“There’s a kiss scene.”

“Please turn down this job.”

“Oh, whatever. It’s not like it’s my first kiss.”

“.....”

Was he imagining this? Or had she just said something he could not ignore?

“Back up, Mai.”

“What?”

“You said you were a virgin.”

“And you said you wouldn’t have held it against me.”

“Yeah, but kissing is another matter entirely.”

“I’m not following your logic. Would you still be upset if you knew the first person I kissed was you?”

“.....”

This time he really didn’t know what she meant. At first.

“Huh?” he uttered with belated surprise.

“I gave you my first kiss. How dare you not remember!”

“Uh...but...huh?”

He thought about what she might mean, but...it was no good. He still didn’t get it. But she didn’t seem like she was lying. The only thing he could think of was the blank period where he’d forgotten her.

“Y-you mean...”

“It doesn’t work like in fairy tales. I thought if I kissed you, you might remember me.”

The disappointment on her face was painful to see.

“I promise I’ll remember, so please name the specific place and time.”

“Nope.”

“At least a hint!”

“Not happening.”

“Please!” He put his hands together.

“Should we try again?”

Sakuta had not been prepared for that suggestion. She was looking up at him seductively. She made fun of him a lot, so this could have been a trap... As she wasn’t acting cute or anything, though, it didn’t seem like she could back out of it that way.

“By all means.”

“Then close your eyes.”

“Mm? Now?”

He’d been assuming they would fully re-create the scene of that first kiss, but apparently not.

“You don’t want to?”

“No, I’m in!”

He closed his eyes and waited. His heart was racing. He was definitely nervous.

“Here goes,” Mai said. She sounded a little embarrassed.

He felt her breath on his cheeks, her warmth close by. He knew she was leaning across the desk.

There was a full second delay, and then his lips felt something soft. Her lips were colder than he expected. And they tasted like fish stock. The same flavor as the egg he’d just been eating... Wait, this

was egg.

He opened his eyes and found Mai using her chopsticks to press the *tamagoyaki* against his lips, desperately trying not to laugh.

“You really thought I’d kiss you?”

Her smile was downright evil.

Rather than answer, Sakuta ate the *tamagoyaki*. His lips closed around the tips of her chopsticks.

“An indirect kiss! Yaaay!” he said, his voice super flat. He figured that would make her more self-conscious.

“.....”

Indeed, her eyes locked onto the tip of her chopsticks. She’d only eaten half her lunch. She must have been wondering how to proceed.

“But you’re all grown-up, Mai,” he said, cutting off any hope of escape. “You’d never be concerned about an indirect kiss with a younger guy.”

“R-right...”

She hesitated a moment, but she’d already committed. She grabbed another bite with the chopsticks and brought it to her lips. She proceeded to finish off the rest of her lunch in silence. She was blushing slightly the whole time, which was a sight for sore eyes.

“Just to be clear, it’s not mine,” she said, wrapping the lunch box in a napkin.

“Mm?”

“The kiss. It’s the lead girl.”

Sakuta was both relieved and disgruntled.

“You really had me going there.”

“But you love me anyway, right?”

“I dunno, even my love might start cooling off at this rate...”

“Wh-what?!” she yelped, suddenly flustered.

“I mean, you just don’t seem interested. You’re not feeling the magic? That’s so discouraging.”

“...I didn’t say no.”

She pursed her lips, sulking—and opened the script.

“Is that a yes?”

“Well, um...” She turned red and hid behind the pages.

“Is it?” he asked again.

Her eyes peered over the top of the script.

“...Fine. It’s a yes,” Mai relented.

Sakuta didn’t remember much about the rest of the day. He was too excited about officially dating Mai to think about anything else.

The next morning, he was still riding that high.

As he got ready for school, he turned on the TV, humming to himself. He glanced over at the news.

“And a big win for the Japan team!” the newscaster said, excited.

“.....”

Weird. He scowled at the screen. This sounded very familiar.

“Good morning. Today is Friday, June twenty-seventh. Our top story today is the results of yesterday’s big game.”

What did he just say?

June 27?

That was definitely what he said.

The highlights of the soccer game were familiar, too. A free kick near the end of the first half, the ball scoring a hit in the net on the far side of the goal.

He ran back to his room and checked the digital clock he used to wake himself up. It had the date on it.

“What the...?”

The screen said June 27, too.

Sakuta Azusagawa had woken up to yesterday morning.

Afterword

Weird events appearing at the happiest moment.

A new form of Adolescence Syndrome?

Or was Sakuta just dreaming? Is he still?

Or...

What does fate hold in store for him?

I hope you're looking forward to the second volume of the *Rascal Does Not Dream of XXXX* series.

As of now, the XXXX part isn't decided yet. It may just wind up being a 2.

I'm hoping to get it out before the end of summer, but what fate has in store...

I am Hajime Kamoshida.

To first-time readers of my work, hello!

To long-time readers, welcome back!

To regular readers, please keep it up!

It's weird how we never visit our local tourist hot spots.

The location I chose for this story fits that feeling perfectly. I've spent most of my life in Kanagawa, but since I can go there anytime, I find myself never really coming up with a reason to do so.

I mean, the *Dengeki* editors' offices are much farther.

Anyway, this is the start of a story set in a town with a view of the sea. I would love it if you continue following along.

The illustrator, Keji Mizoguchi, and my editor, Aragi, were both with me on my previous series, *The Pet Girl of Sakurasou*. I look forward to working with you both on the next book.

And I have faith we'll all meet again in the second volume.

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